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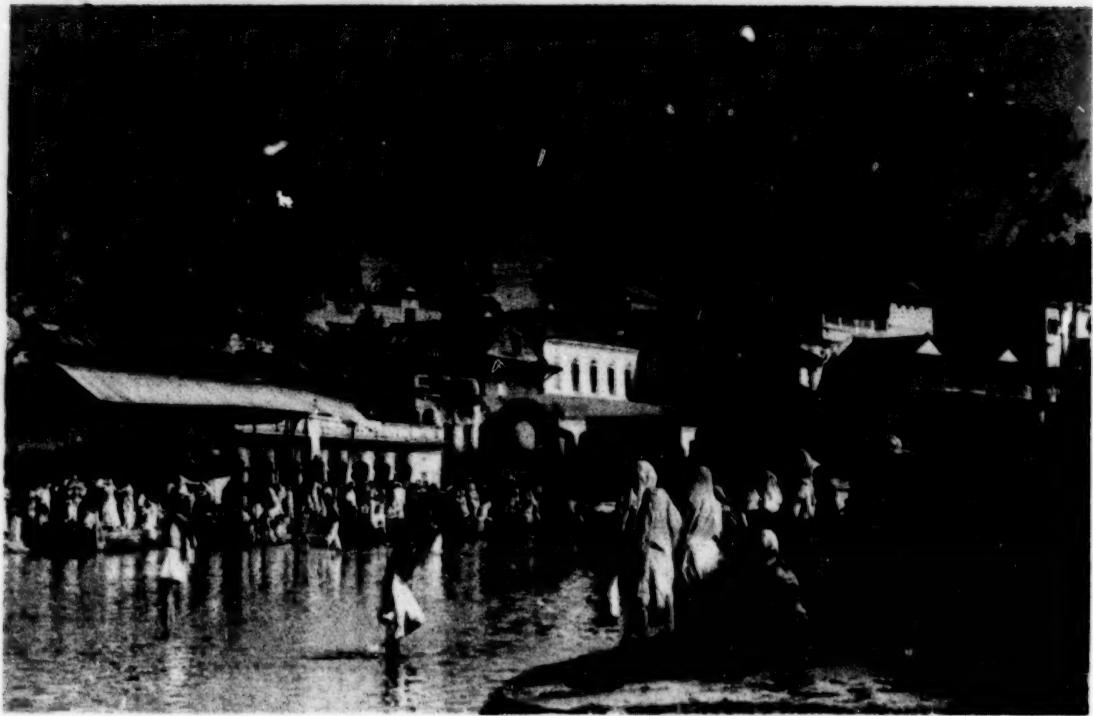


## FESTIVALS

Festivals can mark the seasons of planting and harvesting of crops as deities are worshiped to assure a good harvest. Hundreds of thousands of pilgrims may gather at a sacred site to make offerings to deities, listen to dramas, sing devotional songs, and participate in processions. Often a large fair will be held where caste and tribal groups trade horses, cows, herbs, spices, and goods manufactured by different groups. It is a time when marriages are arranged and when intra-caste business is conducted.

Festivals as well as the planting of crops take place within the seasons according to the phases of the moon and one must consult a lunar calendar to determine the festival date. Lewis Underwood has written an explanation of how the lunar calendar works and summarized the activities associated with the major festivals of Nepal. In different areas of Nepal, festivals to the same deity may take very different forms, and one should not be surprised if local practices are very different than those described.

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## FESTIVALS OF NEPAL

Lewis Underwood

Before listing and describing the origin of Nepal's major festivals as well as the activities characteristic of each, it will be helpful to mention something about the Nepalese calendar. The Nepalese calendar is based on a lunar standard rather than a solar one like ours. This being so, the number of days in the year fluctuate from year to year instead of remaining constant, as in the solar calendar. This means that a festival falling on a particular date one year, will fall on a different date due to the changing phases of the moon. However, it should be understood that the festival occurs on the same day each year, i.e. the 7th day of the dark fortnight or the 3rd day of the light fortnight, but that the actual date and time with reference to the Western calendar will change from year to year depending upon the moon's phases and the position of the stars.

The lunar month is divided into two fortnight periods, or two 15-day periods. The first or light fortnight is the phase when the moon becomes full, while the dark fortnight is the phase when the moon begins to wane. It's actually not as simple as it may first appear, since days get lost and added, creating

both months with 29 days, as well as 32 days. Unless you are an astronomer-astrologer, it's a difficult system to figure out. In fact, it takes an astrologer-priest to set up these calendars and determine not only the date a festival will occur, but the exact time on that day that the ceremonies should begin.

The following discussion is intended to explain the nature of Nepal's omnipresent festivals and their mythological origins, and will attempt to provide a basic insight into the religious and sociological aspects, since these gala, colorful affairs are also significant social functions, celebrated heartily by both Hindus and Buddhists. Since the backgrounds of these festivals are based on myths and have been handed down through the centuries mostly orally and by different ethnic groups, they have been subject to many variations, interpretations, and thus discrepancies. This being so, I will try to cite the most popular stories, as well as those most interesting.

### Nawabarsa and Bisket Jaatara

Nepalese New Year

Baisakh (mid-April)

After having just briefly explained the reason for the inconsistency of festivals falling on different dates each successive year due to the lunar calendar structure, the Nepalese New Year is a holiday that always occurs in mid-April, as it is the day when the sun enters Aries, or Ram, in the Zodiac system. This being so, i.e. New Year's Day remaining fixed year after year, other festivals of this season which are all according to the ancient lunar calendar will some years occur before the New Year Day, while in other years fall after the solar date. In any event Nawabarsa, or New Year's Day, is an official holiday observed throughout the country when all government offices and schools are closed. Not only is it a day of fun and festivity with cultural shows and just friendly get-togethers, but also a day of religious sanctity, especially in the Kathmandu valley and specifically in Bhaktapur (Bhadgaon). Here, preceding Nawabarsa, the festival of Bisket Jaatara is celebrated. The word Bisket comes from the Newari words, "bi" or snake and "svako" or slaughter, while the word jaatara is simply Nepalese for festival.

The origin of this festival goes back to the days when Kathmandu, Patan, and Bhaktapur were separate kingdoms. During these times, one ancient king of Bhaktapur had an only daughter whom he wished to marry off. The pre-wedding custom at this

time was for the royal suitor to spend a night together with the princess before the wedding. However, the problem was that no suitor remained alive by the next morning after sleeping with the princess. It wasn't until one royal suitor, intrigued by the whole situation, agreed to take the challenge that the deaths were halted. After performing his expected rituals with the princess, he hid in a corner of the room with sword in hand. To his surprise, two huge serpent-like creatures appeared from the nostrils of the sleeping princess in search of their usual victim. The suitor then sprang forth out of the darkness and slashed the serpents. In the morning, to the surprise of the King and the people, the suitor emerged alive from the room with the mutilated serpents. A big festival was immediately organized and peoples from near and far came to see the royal suitor and the dead serpents, which were suspended from a pole in the center of town for all to see.

Among the flocking people came also gods and goddesses in the form of human beings. One particularly illustrious deity in attendance was Bhairab, one of Shiva's fierce aspects. One Tantric priest detected Bhairab's presence, and made attempts to detain the God of Wrath and Terror with his magic incantations so that the kingdom might benefit from his all-pervading powers. However, Bhairab realized this and tried to disappear through the ground and just as he was doing so, the priest reached the spot with a sword and severed his head off.

Today, Bhairab's head is represented as a brass mask and is paraded through town on a giant, four wooden-wheeled chariot, along with a locked, black wooden box, supposed to contain Bhairab's real head, but only allowed to be seen by high Tantric priests. Behind Bhairab's chariot is a smaller replica, which carries Bhairab's wife and female counterpart, Bhadra Kali, in the form of an 8-inch figurine. The celebration of Bisket Jaatraa officially begins in Bhaktapur with the emerging of these two chariots being pulled by ropes through cheering, worshipping throngs of jubilant people.

For several nights, there are festivities, traditional dances in the streets, and gifts presented to the two gods in the form of flowers, incense, red powder, rice, consecrated water, etc. Then on the eve of New Year, the chariots are pulled to a big open area where Bhairab and Kali, along with the throngs of people, witness the erection of the Yosin, or eighty-foot pole with a small cross member from which two colorful banners sweep to the ground, which represent the slain serpents. Setting this pole upright by ropes and much manpower usually entails many fruitless attempts, and even sometimes the death of people, when the pole comes crashing to the ground.

After it is erected, later in the same day it is brought smashing down to the ground again after a series of sways and masses of people running in all directions to avoid getting crushed. Only after the pole is pulled down, does the New Year actually commence, which is supposed to symbolize the death of the old year, as well as the demise of the evil snake demons. This event is followed by four days of continued festivities, including the worship of such deities as Ganesh, God of Prosperity, Laksmi, Goddess of Wealth, Saraswati, Goddess of Learning, Maha Kali, another aspect of Shiva's fierce consort, and other gods and goddesses auspicious for the breaking in of the new year.

Maatri Aunsi

Mother's Day

Baisakh (April - May)

This is one of the many festivals that illustrates the tightness and loyalties of the Nepalese family, or the joint-family system that prevails in Nepal. This particular puja is for the purpose of venerating one's mother out of appreciation and gratefulness for all the dukha, or troubles, she has undergone while raising her children, and the love and affection that she gave to them.

For those people whose mothers have died, there is a place near Thankot, west of Kathmandu, where such people make a pilgrimage to on this day to bathe in the holy pond. One of the stories behind the chosen site of this pond involves the tale of a group of cowherders who were tending their cows one day in a nearby meadow. One herder threw a piece of bread in front of him for a bird only to see it disappear in the ground. When he tossed another, it also disappeared. Furthermore, when the other cowherders did the same thing, the morsels of bread would also disappear, but not for all of those who threw them. It was eventually determined that the morsels of bread thrown by herders with deceased mothers would disappear, while those whose mothers were still alive would not. Furthermore, it only happened on that particular day, which was the fifteenth day of the dark fortnight. A pond was soon dug and from that day on, every year on the same day people would go to bathe there and make offerings to their deceased mothers. However, nowadays offerings are made to the Brahmin priests; after they utter the mother's name, it is believed that the gift will reach the soul of the departed mother, and thus give her peace.

There is also a smaller pond above, where it is said that sometimes the deceased mother's face may appear in the water on

this day. However, today, the pond is circumambulated and offerings of food and tiny boats, in the form of folded leaves with lit oil wicks, are consecrated to the pond whether the mother's face is seen or not. Legend has it that once a small girl, after seeing her mother's face in the water, jumped in and was never seen again.

For those people with their mothers still alive, this is a festive day of preparing all sorts of sweets and specially prepared foods, and then going to visit one's mother. This is a particularly happy day for married daughters, who, after preparing these fancy foods and donning their prettiest sarees, get a chance to go see their mothers, who often live in the place of their birth, and thus, a happy festive reunion ensues with the whole family. Gifts are offered to the mothers who in turn give the blessings to their sons and daughters who bow down before them.

#### Raato Machhendranath Ratha Jaatraa

The Chariot Ride of Red Machhendra Baisakh

Baisakh (April - May)

This particular jaatraa is one of Kathmandu's most famous and spectacular festivals, attended by the King and Queen, as well as recognized by both Hindus and Buddhists. Machhendra, also known as Lokeswar, and/or Padma Pani Bidhisattva is hailed as the Guru and Protector of the World.

Legend has it that Shiva, himself, was a disciple of this great guru, who taught him the secret meditation of attaining union with the Supreme Being. After learning this, Shiva returned to his realm on Mount Kailash in the Himalayas, and began telling Parbati, his wife, about the teachings. As he began to expound on the subject matter, Machhendra appeared, curious to hear what Shiva had learned and so in hiding assumed the form of a fish and listened, while Parbati duly fell asleep. When Shiva finished, he realized that Parbati had not heard it, but detected the presence of someone and angrily demanded that whoever it was show himself immediately. When Machhendra appeared in his true form, Shiva, in his humiliation, bowed down and asked for forgiveness. It is from this story that Machhendra is said to have received his name, more specifically from the word "Machha" or fish.

However, Machhendra is highly reverenced for yet another story, when he saved Kathmandu Valley from succumbing to a famine caused by a 12-year drought. Apparently, a disciple of

Machhendra's was wishing to meet with him, but because the guru was in seclusion undergoing deep meditation in Assam, he didn't want to interrupt him blatantly. So in order to attract his attention, he caused this drought by capturing and holding the rain-making snake gods as prisoners under a hill near Parsupati Nath temple, upon which he sat in meditation, thinking that Machhendra, also known as the God of Mercy, would come to the valley out of pity for the people. In an attempt to alleviate the situation, the King of Bhaktapur, a learned man himself, went to fetch Machhendra. As he approached the place of his recluse, he recited such powerful mantras and Machhendra was transformed into a black bumble bee, and flew into the king's golden ceremonial vase. When they reached Kathmandu Valley, the disciple, recognizing the bee as his guru, arose from his hilltop seat, releasing the snakes, which immediately brought torrential rains to the arid land and the people rejoiced in the wetness. In the same spot, a town was built and the golden vessel that kept Machhendra as the bee was enshrined. From then on, the vase itself was worshipped as the God of Rain and Harvest, and any big black bumble bee was regarded sacred, and thus, is not killed even today. Farmers have since venerated him as the Provider--providing rains calling on their grains to grow.

The actual jaataraa is another one when the giant wooden-wheeled chariots are pulled out and along the narrow streets with a large one conveying the five-foot image of Machhendra, and a smaller one that houses an idol considered to be his son and/or daughter, called Meenath. Again festivities are omnipresent with dancers, bands, colored powders, incense, flowers and in general a chromatic, raucous affair filled with excitement and religious fervor. The carts are pulled from Pulchok to Jawalakhel, moving only perhaps a few hundred yards per day and may only reach their destination months later. The time-consuming procession is not due to distance or the weight of the vehicles, but because of the astrologer's calculations that the lumbering carts can only be pulled on certain days at certain times. This being so, the carts may even reach Jawalakhel as late as August.

On this last leg of the journey, the festival reaches its climax, as this is the exhibition of the bphoto, or jewel-studded vest. This bphoto was presented to a farmer by a snake-god for healing his serpent queen's sore eye. It was subsequently stolen by evil spirits, and then later, during a Machhendranath festival the vest was spotted by the farmer as it was being worn by a demon, disguised as a human. A dispute ensued between the eye-healing farmer and the demon, but the snake god, who was also present, stepped in to try to settle the matter. It was finally decided that the bphoto should be presented to Lord Machhendra for safe-keeping. Thus, from that

day on, it was hung in the archway of Machhendra's towering chariot for all to see and be assured of its safety. Today, for this event the King and Queen, high government officials, and military officers join the hordes to witness this display.

For this last phase of the jaataraa, Bhoto Jaataraa, it is said that it must rain to show that Machhendra is pleased, which is a most probable event since this day occurs during the monsoon. When the rains come everyone cheers and rejoices under the military gun volley to salute the auspicious rains. Then, before the chariots are moved from the field to their resting place, a priest climbs to the top of Machhendra's spire to drop a copper bowl to the ground. If it lands face down, the valley will be blessed by rainfall and prosperity for the year, but if it lands face up then this is portentous of a possible famine. The chariots are then pulled the rest of the way in merriment with dancing and music, and the sprinkling of holy water along the path in front of the carts.

#### Buddha Jayanti

Celebration of the Triple Blessing of Lord Buddha

Baisakh (April-May)

On this day, or Baisakh Purnima, the full moon of the month of Baisakh is hailed as the Triple Blessing of Lord Buddha, or the day that Buddha was not only born, but also the day that he received enlightenment, as well as the day he passed into Nirvana. This joyous festival is tumultuous in nature especially since Lord Buddha, the Light of Asia, was born near the southern border of Nepal in Lumbini of Kapilavastu District, and thus, not only the Buddhists, but also the Hindus pay their homage to the Blessed Son of Nepal.

Guatama Siddhartha was born on the full moon day from between his mother's ribs, and then some 30-plus years later, underneath the bodh, or banyan, tree at Bodh Gava on the dawn of the full moon, became enlightened with perfect knowledge. From then on, Guatama was glorified as Buddha, the Enlightened One. And then, as he approached his 80th year of life, on the full moon day he passed away into Nirvana, beyond the cycle of rebirth and attained the highest state of spiritual peace.

Today, besides this puja being celebrated in the countless homes and temples, spectacular colorful affairs are celebrated at Swayambhu Nath, Bouddha Nath, and Lumbini. The latter locality is currently undergoing development, mostly by improving the routes of access to the sacred ground. A highway

is now under construction from Bhairava to Lumbini, as well as the renovation of the Bhairava airport, which is apparently to become an international one, bringing pilgrims from Tokyo, Southeast Asia, and Japan to visit and pay tribute to the Compassionate One's birthplace.

In Kathmandu Valley, this festival is celebrated by fasting, flying multi-colored banners and prayer flags, and the display of images of the Buddha from house windows. A triple Swayambhu and devotional circumambulations are the real focal points of public celebration on this day. The devotees come to circumambulate the stupa, donate foodstuffs and coins to numerous Buddha figurines; luxuriantly robed Newari monks and Tibetan lamas perform majestic religious ceremonies which include chanting, dancing, and music-making. At Bodh Nath, the Tibetan Buddhist tradition dominates the day, with the circumambulation of a figure of Buddha on the back of an elephant the highlight.

#### Doodh Kunda Jaatraas

##### Festivals at the Pond of Milk

##### Baisakh Full Moon (April-May)

Doodh Kunda is scenically located against the Himal in Sagarmatha Zone at an elevation of 14,000 feet. It is said to be a pond with water as white as milk. Furthermore, the pond is always covered with snow, except on two days of the year, the full moon of Baisakh, or Buddha's Triple Blessing Day and on the full moon of Shrawan (July-August), when the snow amazingly clears up. The Buddhists in the area, mainly Tibetans, worship this sacred day of their Lord next to the holy pond with chanting and reading of the scriptures. On the Shrawan full moon, Hindus flock to this area to celebrate the auspicious day.

It should be mentioned that full moon days are often the occasion for special ritual worship rites in most parts of Nepal.

### Harishavani

#### The Sleeping Vishnu

Asaar (June - July)

The eleventh day of each lunar fortnight, called ekadasi, which occurs 24 times a year, or bimonthly, is recognized as an auspicious day for fasting, especially for those devoted to Lord Vishnu. Moreover, Nepalese law forbids the slaughtering and/or selling of meat on these days, as well as the execution of any criminal. The reason behind this is mythological. It is said that Vishnu set aside every eleventh day of the lunar phases for man to correct past bad karma by denying his body rice, which is supposed to contain every aspect of sin on these days.

One of the more propitious ekadasis is one that occurs on the light half of Asaar. This particular ekadasi is regarded as the day when Lord Vishnu begins a sleep, taking rest from his works in the world of man, until the eleventh day of Karitik (October-November). Since he will be inactive for this four-month period, people feel uneasy and insecure, and thus go to venerate him on this day.

In Kathmandu, those religious-minded people fast for the day and make a pilgrimage to Narayanthan where they give worship offerings to the sleeping Vishnu. In the evening, their fast is broken, but only with fruits and breads.

Since the King is recognized as an incarnate of Vishnu, Hindus believe that should he ever see this particular image at Narayanthan, he would die or some other disastrous event would occur. Thus, the King is never known to have visited this sacred spot. Instead he visits a replica in Balaju, which is where he pays his homage to this deity.

### Nag Panchami

#### The Day of the Snake Gods

Shrawan (July-August)

Nagas, or snake gods, are highly venerated creatures in Nepalese mythology and folklore. They are often depicted as guardians for the gods, but are alternatively also portrayed as malevolent divinities requiring vindication by the powers of good. When honored they are believed to bring the much needed rains to the earth, as well as fortune and protection of



wealth and treasures. If not honored, the nagas may prevent the rains from falling, causing droughts. Loss of wealth, death from snake bite, and even the destruction of homes and buildings can also result from a naga's displeasure.

This latter ill-fated event is based on the belief that the Nagas, or serpent gods, live in the lower realms and if not appeased, their gyrations and squirming can cause houses to fall down. This is actually not a rare occurrence since many of these dwellings are built with soft muds and without skeletal support. To avoid such a mishap, a plot of land prior to construction should be divided into a specific geometric pattern of 81 portions. An astrologer, after checking the position of the stars, can then determine under what section the snake gods thrive. He can thereby take the necessary precautions, which usually means hanging a paper image made of a human face with a snake's body over that particular spot. After this is done, construction can proceed without fear of provoking the local nagas.

Besides the annual worship of Nag Panchmi, there are other small pujas done when snakes are respected more or less out of fear. In any place where a snake can be found, whether in a house, garden, corner, cracked wall, or well, rituals may be performed in hope that the snake gods will never be offended, and thus, never attack or bite the local people. There is even a special day for cleaning out wells founded on this fear. If a snake does bite, a person will be treated by the uttering of powerful mantras. Even when the person is dying or dead, Tantric priests can be summoned to compel the snake to return to the victim, extract the poison and save the victim.

According to Newar mythology, the Kathmandu Valley was an enormous lake filled with nagas until Manjushti, the Buddhist Bodhisattva of Divine Wisdom, when coming to visit Swayambhu Nath and finding his destination inaccessible due to this obstacle, cut a cleft in the southern barrier of the valley, now Chobar Gorge, with his mighty sword, immediately releasing all the water along with the serpents, creating the fertile valley of Kathmandu. All that remained was the Naga Raja, or king of the serpent gods, who to this day is said to reside in the waters of Taudah Pond on a palace of gold and silver just beyond the gorge.

Naga Raja, angry at his lake home's destruction, in turn caused a prolonged drought to punish the ruling King who had committed incest. However, the King possessed Tantric powers and foiled the Naga with his spells, forcing him to bring down the rain. It was from then on believed that worshiping the idols of the snake gods, as is done during Nag Panchami, could conjure up the same effects.

The actual puja of Nag Panchami occurs on the fifth day of the light fortnight of Sravan, which is when every home, shop, and office hangs paper images, colored by children, depicting the snake gods on the cross beam above their doors. Initially, the beam is cleansed with water and cow dung by a Brahmin or the head of the family, and then some more dung added by which the serpent picture is adhered. A tika of red paste and rice is then applied and a puja is performed with incense, sprinkling of holy water, and flowers in the presence of the family. Lastly, prasaad, or food, is offered, commonly in the form of boiled rice, milk, honey, and sometimes curd, while prayers are intoned. People may also go to Pahupati Nath to worship the snake images there, particularly the Basuki Naga, the fearless, billowy hooded serpent who is the guardian of Lord Shiva's treasures.

Nag Panchami is also a day of rest for farmers, as the story goes that one farmer, ignorant of the fact that the day was for snake worship, inadvertently killed three baby nagas of a she-serpent while plowing his field. The she-serpent, after returning to her lair, discovering the tragedy, and then finding the blood on the plow, in a fierce rage sought out to find the farmer. Coming upon the farmhouse, she slithered inside and killed the farmer, his wife and children. In order to assassinate the whole family, the she-serpent then proceeded to a nearby village, where the married daughter of the farmer's family lived. However, when she came across her, she found her worshipping the snake images with flowers and frankincense. Touched and pleased by the act, the naga exposed herself and explained her plight to the daughter. Upon hearing about the death of her family, the daughter begged the she-serpent for mercy and a means to restore them to life. The Naga then produced a life-giving nectar that the daughter quickly took back to her maternal village and sprinkled upon her family. They were restored to life and as everyone rejoiced, the daughter explained the story to the family and the rest of the village. "Now from this day, when the month of Shrawan cometh thou shouldst worship the Nagas on the fifth day in the bright fortnight according to rites laid down, and should place before them at night, frankincense, lamps, and food. And on that day thou shalt not dig, neither shalt thou kill anything on that day."

## Janai Purni/Raksha Bandhan

### The Sacred Thread Festival

Shrawan (July-August)

Janai Purani, also referred to as Goonpooni (Virtuous Full Moon Day) or Rishi Purnima (Full Moon of the Sages), is a significant puja when not only high caste Hindu men change their sacred thread that they wear over one shoulder, but also when all Hindu men and women receive the yellow raksha thread tied to the right wrist of men and the left wrist of women.

The janai, or the sacred yellow thread worn by Brahmins and Chhetris, is changed every year on this day by a Brahmin priest. The day before Janai Purni the male shaves his head, cuts his whiskers, trims his nails, bathes, and undertakes a special "fast" of only one meal but with no meat, onion, or garlic. The next morning, the priest comes to the home and performs the rites necessary to make the thread sacred in the name of Lord Vishnu. Three strands of thread comprise the janai, symbolizing body, speech, and mind, while the knots that are tied represent control over these three aspects. The janai is then adorned over the Brahmin's or Chhetri's head.

For all Hindu men, women, and children, regardless of caste, this purnima is also forecasted as favorable for receiving the raksha bandhan thread, i.e. raksha for protection, while bandhan signifies bond--bond of protection. This thread is tied to the wrists, again by Brahmin priests, who with lines of people awaiting their turn to buy the threads from them, apply the thread while intoning short mantras for each customer. This thread is supposed to be worn for three months, until Laxmi Puja, the Festival of Lights, when it is removed and tied to the tail of a cow. The sacred cow is then believed to serve as a "ferry" for the person when he dies by leading him by the tail across the fiery river, Bhaitarna, and other barriers enroute to the Gates of Judgment, where karma is weighed and the status of rebirth determined. These threads are distributed in three main locales, mentioned below.

Gosainkund, a holy lake, is located about 25 miles north of Kathmandu in the Ganesh Himal region. According to legend, this pond was formed by Lord Shiva when he pierced a glacier with his trident to quench his thirst after catching the earth-threatening venom of a powerful serpent in his mouth. Every year on Janai Purna/Raksha Bandhan, pilgrims congregate on the shores of this lake, where a mela, or fair, takes place, as well as holy bathing, and worshipping ceremonies to Shiva. Pilgrims who become dizzy and feel faint while trekking to this

sacred spot, rather than blame it on the altitude, believe that this effect is due to the lingering venom persisting in the lake waters when Shiva rinsed out his mouth. There is also a reddish stone similar in appearance to Nanda, Shiva's bull and vehicle, and consequently many people believe there used to be an ancient temple of Shiva on the banks of this lake. Furthermore, legend says that a devotee who dropped his brass lota, or water-holding vessel, in Gosainkunda while bathing and then losing sight of it, found that it miraculously appeared in Kumbeshwar Pond in Patan. It was then postulated that Gosainkunda and Kumbeshwar Pond were connected by an underground river, which is why they say the latter remains cold throughout the year.

In the Kathmandu Valley, Kumbeshwar pond is one of the two locales where the raksha thread is received. For this thread-giving ceremony, the night before the full moon, a lavish display accompanies the toting of a gleaming-gilded Shiva lingum, from the temple courtyard to a platform in the center of the pond itself. Each step of the trek is accompanied by holy incantations, blasts of trumpets, the feverish beating of drums, and the cheers from the thousands who gather to witness the procession. When the lingum reaches the center of the pond, via a wooden plankway, it is set on a platform covered by a canopy. This moment is celebrated by a tumultuous roar from the throngs, a shower of rice, coins, and flowers being thrown, and the splashing of water by boys which drenches the lingum, the priests, and everyone nearby. The rest of the night is filled with strange, primal tunes until just before daybreak.

By this time, men are already in the pond water, submerging themselves in the holy, chilly water, bathing the lingum while women in lines wait to touch and pay respect to the lingum. After these prerequisites, they line up to receive the thread from the priests.

At Pasupati Nath, similar goings-on take place, except that bathing is done in the holy Bagmati River, and the multitude of beggars and cripples are heartily fed. The day before the full moon puja, Pashupathi Nath is closed, as it is believed that Lord Shiva revisits Gosainkunda on this day.

Janai-Purni/Raksha Bandhan is also a day on which a special dish, consisting of nine types of beans and called Kwaati is prepared and eaten by families in their homes. This dish, made from boiling dry beans, is said to purge the body inside, in conjunction with the holy bathing which cleanses the body outside.

In farming communities, this is also the day of the Feeding of the Frogs, or Byancha Janake. Food, as well as the Kwaati, are cast into ditches for the frogs. This is done for a number of reasons--some of which are based on such beliefs as that frogs help bring rain with their croaking which reminds Lord Indra, God of the Heavens, to provide rain; others say that frogs have been known to aid in the disposal of evil demons. Furthermore, during other times of the year, dried frog meat is offered to the much feared Sitala, Goddess of Smallpox, in hope of protection against this disease.

### Ghantaakarna

Degradation of a Demon

Shrawan (July-August)

One version of this exorcising-type festival is that once a giant called Ghantaakarna came to Kathmandu for the sole purpose of creating havoc. After a long struggle, however, the people were able to kill him. Thus, on the fourteenth day of the dark fortnight of Shrawan, effigies of reeds and straw, representing the giant Ghantaakarna, are made and erected at the crossroads in the city where children will usually block the right of way of passers-by until they have paid a jagaat, or toll. By evening, people have brought husks, onions, garlic, and rotten foods topped with burning wicks, and set them next to the effigies for the purpose of pacifying the evil spirits. Then persons from the untouchable castes, wearing only loin clothes, burn the effigies and subsequently are seated upon the charred effigies and dragged to the banks of the Bagmati, where the rotting foodstuffs and effigy remains are cast aside.

For those believing in the supernatural arts, this day is believed to be favorable for witches and wizards to consult their tutelary deities and demons, and hence, become more powerful. However, wherever one's beliefs may lie, this bizarre festival is enjoyable for most, as it usually marks the end of the arduous work of the rice-transplanting season.

### Gunlaa

The Holy Month for Buddhists

Bhaadra (August-September)

Gunlaa is the ninth month of the year according to a unique time system used by Newars. With the work of transplanting over, those who choose to do so, may devote this month to

religious duties by going to various temples, especially Swayambhu. There they chant hymns, play instruments, and perform rituals of devotion. Devout Buddhists may also abstain from eating meat and drinking liquor during this month.

### Gaai Jaatara

#### The Festival of the Cows

Bhaadra (July-August)

This lively, colorful week-long festival of Kathmandu Valley immediately follows Janai Purni and marks the beginning of the month of Bhaadra. The first day of this Jaatara is celebrated with both mini- and maxi-processions of painted cows, as well as merry boys garnished with straw horns and paper cow-head masks. These processions are originated and organized by Hindu families who have experienced the death of a family member during the past year, believing that the Gates of Yama, God of Death and determiner of reincarnation, are opened by the horns of the cows. Furthermore, it is believed that up until these gates, the departed soul is led along by clinging to a cow's tail through rivers of fire and other barriers. Before the procession begins, each of the bereaved families perform pujas inside of their households which is followed by dousing cows with dyes and powders and/or costuming the young sons of these families. After the procession, the cloth that served as the cow's tail for the boys, or in the case of a real cow, the cloth that was tied to its tail, is then cut up and hung around the neck of each family member for good fortune and protection.

The rest of the day is filled with more processions through the bazaar streets, though now of a comic, often politically satirical nature. People celebrate the end of the rice-transplanting season, and consequently, partake in quantitative drinking of jard, or rice beer. Some dress in brightly colored costumes, including men in sarees, and parade and clown around, putting on skits with song and dance, and mock Nepalese institutions of all sorts, which is freely permitted during this festival.

The origin of this festival is said to have been the procreation of King Pratap Malla's in the eighteenth century, when he was trying to cheer up his queen after the death of their son. He first sent out a procession of cows in memory of the boy, and then ordered the people who had suffered the same misfortune to do likewise, hoping that the queen would then realize the commonplaceness of such happenings. However, all of this was to no avail. It was then that the king posted a reward



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for anyone able to restore joy to the queen. When the people arrived in masses with outrageous costumes and garb, the queen went into hysterics, which is when the king proclaimed that the joyous event be a national festival to be repeated every year hence. It is also now believed that these zany acts, even though in ridicule, earn religious merit that adds weight on the side of good karma, when Yama, the lord of the afterlife, determines the fate of a departed soul.

### Krishna Javanti

The Birthday of Lord Krishna

Bhaadra (July-August)

This celebrated day occurs on the eighth and last day of the Gaai Jaatra festivities and is jubilated with the usual processions with small groups carrying garlanded idols through the streets amidst music; dance, and chanting. In addition, stories of Krishna are read by pundits, learned scholars, in public places, while all over the bazaar people bring out their fabulous paintings depicting the reputed events of Krishna's life. At night, in various Hindu temples, especially the Krishna Mandar in Patan, women devotees chant religious hymns until dawn.

### Gokarna Aunsi

Father's Day

Bhaadra (August-September)

This festival falls on the fifteenth day of the dark half of the month of Bhaadra, and is similar to Maatri Aunsi, except this is a day when fathers are venerated. Those whose fathers have died go to Gokarna, a holy river next to the King's Forest. The pilgrims bathe and offer ritual offerings. Those sons and daughters whose fathers are living, return to their natal home and celebrate with gifts and a special feast.

In Nepal, all fathers wish to have at least one son, for it's a son who must perform the formal rites after the father dies to ensure that his soul is blessed by peace after cremation. For this ritual, the son must shave his head, except for the tupi (the lock of hair on the crown of the head), wear all white clothing, and seclude himself from the rest of the family for a period of 13 days, during which he must never be touched by anyone. This means that he must prepare his own food, which should only consist of boiled rice and ghee, along with lemon, ginger,

and/or radishes. Furthermore, he can only eat one time per day, excluding one cup of black tea. He is also supposed to rest on a pile of straw, depriving himself of sleep as much as possible. This period of abstinence and asceticism is supposed to help the deceased father's soul progress along the path to heavenly realms.

At Gokarna, for those with deceased fathers, men and women bathe in the holy river and they pay tribute to Shiva in the form of one of his countless lingums.

### Teej/Haritaalikaa

The Fasting Festival for Women

Bhaadra (August-September)

This festival, which begins on the third day of the light half of Bhaadra and lasting for three days, is exclusively for Hindu women, especially for the high caste Brahmin and Kshetriya ladies, though women from other castes and communities may by all means participate. This puja is undertaken by married and unmarried women beyond puberty but before menopause. Its purpose for married women is to ensure a long life for their husbands; for the unmarried it is to enhance the possibility of being selected by a good husband.

The first day of the festival consists of a big feasting party, when the women congregate themselves in one room and, out of sight of the menfolk and children, gorge themselves with delicacies of meats and sweets specially prepared for the occasion. Then, at midnight, the fast begins which requires not only refraining from food, but from liquid of any kind as well. It is typical at this time for the women to stay up all night gossiping, singing, and dancing. The origin of this festival is based on the time when Parbati fell in love with Shiva and desired to be married to him. However, her father wanted her to marry Vishnu. To show her loyalty to Shiva, on the day she was supposed to marry Vishnu, she fled and concealed herself in the jungle. There she fasted, and devoted all her austerities to winning him. Shiva then appeared in the form of Vishnu to test Parbati's faithfulness and sincerity. Shiva was moved by her devotion to him and then appeared in his true form and with the consent of the Divine Sage, Naarada, or son of Bratma, they were happily married.

On the morning of the second day, the women adorned in their beautiful sarees, bangles, and ribbons in an array of brilliant colors--married women wearing their scarlet and gold

wedding sarees along with their most precious jewelry--begin their pilgrimage to Pashupati Nath. (Women outside the valley perform this aspect of the puja in other holy places.) Here they first bathe in the holy river, and then worship the gold Shiva lingum with many offerings. They then proceed through the labyrinth of 108 smaller lingums singing and dancing, while Brahman priests sit reading the mythological tales of Parbati and her fasting. The next puja done before returning to their husbands involves performing a ritual in front of an idol of Shiva and Parbati, when 108 grains of rice, flower petals, and bits of fruit are counted out. These are then offered to the godly couple and a lamp is left to burn for the whole night.

The next morning, the wife offers some of the consecrated food to her husband and touches her forehead to his feet, and is then supposed to wash his feet and drink this liquid. The fast is then broken, and Lord Ganesh, elephant-headed god, is then worshipped with sweets (his favorite food) and medicinal herbs. Ganesh is worshipped here as the Remover of Obstacles, who helps to bring about success in the devotee's endeavors.

The fourth day-night festival is recognized as Ganesh Chathaa by some communities, especially by the Newars. This is a night when special dishes, consisting of fruits, fried beans, grains, seeds, and sweets are offered to the moon goddess, Chandrama. At sunset, before the moon appears, people close themselves in their houses, blocking all possible entries of moonlight, as it is an inauspicious day requiring one to hide from the moonbeams.

The story behind this day is once Ganesh was infuriated at the moon goddess for not recognizing him as a god and for ridiculing him. In his rage, Ganesh cursed the goddess, and said that anyone looking upon the moon would become a hopeless, addicted, thief. By this he forced the moon goddess into hiding. Men and gods became uneasy in the dark nights that followed without moonlight, and thus begged Ganesh to lift his curse. Ganesh finally complied under the stipulation that on the fourth night of the bright fortnight, the curse would persist every year.

Paradoxically, this is also an auspicious day for thieves, as it is said that if they are successful in looting something worthy on this day, that they will have a propitious year. If they are not successful, then it is an ill omen indicating possible seizure by the police. Furthermore, anyone thinking of becoming a thief is supposed to perform special rites to Ganesh on this day, so that thieving will not become a greedy addiction.

The fifth day of this lunar phase, or the third and final day of the women's festival, is known as Rishi Panchami, a day of

partial fasting and profuse holy bathing. This act of intense purification is central for all the women who participate in Teej. Bathing in a river, most desirably a tributary of the Ganges, is done in a special manner. First of all, the women are required to brush their teeth with a particular herb found near the riverside, called appamarga, 360 times, and then, with red mud found around the roots of a sacred bush, called datiwan, and women are supposed to cleanse their bodies by smearing this mud 360 times on their hands, elbows, shoulders, knees, feet, and genitals. This ceremonial bathing is said to purge the body and absolve the women of any ill merit gained by possible contamination to others during their menstrual periods. On this day the Brahmin priests are fed by the women, while the women themselves eat only one meal of grains and vegetables procured by manual labor, and not by oxen. The reason for this is to respect Shiva and give his reverenced vehicle and fertility symbol a day of rest.

Indra Jaatara and Kumari Jaatara

Festival of the King of the Gods

and of the Living Goddess

Bhaadra (August-September)

This eight-day long festival, beginning on the twelfth day of the bright half of Bhaadra and ending on the fourth day of the dark half of Ashwin, is colorful and spectacular not only in its characteristic processions and activities, but also in its mythological and historical origin.

Legend has it that Indra in the disguise of a human, came to earth to collect a certain white flower Pearijaata, for his mother since they were especially treasured by her. Upon picking some of these flowers, he was apprehended by the local people, who did not recognize him as Indra. They bound his hands and feet, and led him through the streets to humiliate and disgrace him, as they do with any caught thief. When Indra's mother discovered what had happened, she appeared on earth in her true godly form, revealing her identity, as well as her son's. When the people realized this, they bowed down in reverence and both of them went in procession through the city streets and were honored by a thundering ovation. In return for her son's release, Indra's mother pledged to nurture the valley's crops with dew and mist during the fall and winter to ripen them for harvest, while also offering to lead back to heaven all the souls of deceased persons of the year. However, on her return journey the procession of souls she was guiding broke, causing some to fall back towards earth. The place where they fell was a lake on a hilltop eight miles west of Kathmandu called Indra Daha.

The festival begins with the hoisting of the pole that will fly Indra's banner of victory, which is supposed to signify peace and unity, in front of the old palace at Hanuman Dhoka. This pole is erected at a precise time calculated by astrologers. It must be a 50-foot pine tree that has been stripped of its branches, sanctified by a baci sacrifice, and dragged by men from a specific forest, about 15 miles outside of the city. As the time comes to raise the pole, music blares, sabers are thrust upwards, guns fire in unison, and the crowd roars. Idols of Indra from temples are then brought out and displayed on high platforms, where they are garlanded in vividly colored flowers.

This festival is also famous for its celebrations and rites paid to Bhairab, the fierce manifestation of Siva. Along with victory celebrations, evil spirits and demons are also exorcised. To certify that this is done, many masks of Bhairab's fearful face are uncovered and revealed to the public eye, as well as the huge famous copper-plated masks at Hanuman Dhoka and Indra Chowk. A chariot, or ratha, with one of these huge masks, is led through the streets and food that was consecrated to the fierce deity, such as rice, meat, fish, beans, eggs, and vegetables are distributed to the hordes, while home-made rice beer poured out of the god's mouth is excitedly drunk by the people.

Many masked dances and dramas, wild and violent in nature, also take place. One of these dances, that proceeds through the streets, is called the Sano Bhaku Demon Dance. It requires that special rules be observed by the people, such as no sarees hanging from the balconies, and no opened umbrellas shown in public. If either of these are encountered, the demons will tear them to shreds with their swords, and they must be appeased by drinking the blood from goat and/or chicken sacrifices.

Another dance involves someone impersonating the elephant, depicting Indra's elephant vehicle in an outrage, searching for his master when he was imprisoned. During this event, he will snatch hats off on-lookers and swing a large tail that often knocks people completely off their feet.

There was also one other dance that is worth mentioning, even though it has been discontinued since the 1940's. This dance consisted of a bull fight-like scene that took place within the old palace grounds, where a male water-buffalo after being fed liquor and enraged by stabs from Kukhri knives, charged people dressed as masked demons, who danced around his vengeful thrusts. When the tortured beast finally died, the dancers would rush over to it and drink its blood. They were then said to be possessed by the buffalo spirit, and would dance frenetically around the slain animal.

On the day before the full moon, the procession of the Royal Kumari, the Living Goddess, occurs. She is worshipped by all the people, as well as the King himself, who must bow down and touch his head to her feet. The origin of the selection of a Newari girl to be deified as the vestal virgin, which occurs on the average, about every 10 years, began with the last of the Malla Newar Kings. Apparently, during his reign, a little Newari girl became possessed by the Goddess Taleju, or the Divine patron goddess of the Mallas. The King, suspicious of fraud, banished her from the city. However, the same night, his queen claimed that she was possessed by the goddess, displaying symptoms of pain and ecstasy, alternately. The King, in his fear, immediately summoned his servants to find the girl and bring her back. When she was returned to the city, the royal family worshipped her and the King declared a public festival.

Another tale relates that the same King used to frequently gamble with the goddess Taleju. One day he grew fond of her to the point of lust. When this occurred, the goddess vanished, only to appear later in a dream of his, telling him that his dynasty was near its downfall and that he would never see her again. He was also instructed to choose a Newari girl from the Sakya caste, in whom she would house her spirit, and hence, from then on be venerated through her.

The Kumari girl selection, which occurs after the previous one has had her first menstrual period, is a secret esoteric process. However, one source says that the candidate must walk across several animal heads in a dark chamber, lit only by oil wick lamps which reflect the animals' eyes and gaping mouths. Masked, shrieking demons jump out of the shadows. If she shows any sign of fear or emotion, she is said to be eliminated from the selection process. Two male children from the same caste are also chosen to represent the deities Bhairab and Ganesh, and accompany Kumari on her many processions and appearances during festivals in the town.

When the royal Kumari is chosen, she is separated from the family and housed near Hanuman Dhoka, where she is showered in luxurious robes and jewels, and from then on always tended to by women servants. She then becomes a vital part of the decision-making process for auspicious occasions. Many people come to pay their respects and ask for advice each day. All of her gestures are interpreted as good or bad omens. During this festival, this Kumari places the sacred red tika on the King's forehead, and by doing so blesses him for another year's rule.

The procession of Kumari begins with throngs of people gathering outside her door, while the King and Queen, along with Nepalese and foreign dignitaries assemble on the balcony

of the old palace in front of her residence. When she appears in her gold robes and jeweled crown, the Buddhist priests ring bells in front of the waiting chariots. After the sacrifice of a goat to appease Bhairab, and a military gun salute, the procession plods forward, stopping momentarily in front of the balcony where the King watches. He then bows to her and tosses coins to the multitude. The procession resumes through the bazaar for all to see and honor while the masks of Bhairab continue to squirt rice beer through their painted mouths.

The great historical event of the overthrow of the Malla dynasty by Prithvi Narayan Shah, the present King's ancestor from Gorkha, occurred on this same day in 1768. When the Malla King who could not get his celebrating, drunken soldiers organized to defend themselves, he fled in defeat, marking the fall of the Kathmandu Malla kingdom, as the goddess Taleju had forecast in the king's dream. The new conqueror then ordered the festivities to resume, and joined in the Kumari procession himself. When the auspicious time came for Kumari to present the King with the tika, Prithivi Narayan Shah bowed his head, received the tika, and thus, the present Shah dynasty became the ruling royal family.

Another portentous event occurred in 1955 during King Tribhuvan's reign, when the Kumari unintentionally placed the tika on the crown Prince Mahendra instead of the King. The incident, which was considered a bad omen, became prophetic when eight months later the King suffered a heart attack and Mahendra took the throne.

In the closing days of the festival, on the evening of the full moon, a dancer, costumed as the female demon Dagini, leads a line of women holding on to each others' sashes and a separate line of men carrying a long plank of wood upon their shoulders. With lit oil lamps they proceed through the bazaar in search of those lost souls that were dropped from the procession that Indra's mother was leading to heaven. These men and women are all from households where a death occurred during the year. Those even more devoted may make a pilgrimage to the pond of Indra Daha in the night underneath the near full moon in order to arrive there at daybreak for a holy bath. During this time, Indra is believed to be present at this sacred pond.

On the final evening, the pole flying Indra's banner is lowered in equal pomp and circumstance to that which accompanied its erection. When it has reached the ground, many rush forward to touch their head to it. Then it is dragged down to the holy river of the Bagmati, as in a funeral column, submerged in the river, and later chopped up and fed to the sacred fire that perpetually burns at the Pachali Bhairab Shrine on the banks of the Bagmati.

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## Durgaa Puja

### The Festival of the Goddess of Victory

Ashwin (September-October)

This festival is often described to the Western world as the 'Christmas of the East.' It is a two week-long event celebrated by all the peoples of Nepal: all ethnic groups, castes, rich and poor, take part. It is a time of gift giving and receiving, being with family and friends, and partaking in big hearty feasts. It is the most joyous festival of the year. Red can also be classified as the color of the season, but most unlike our Christmas, the red in Dasain does not symbolize a jolly fat man's costume but rather the blood from thousands of animal sacrifices that drench the idols of Durgaa, the Goddess who yearly triumphs over Evil.

This is the time of year when people are busy preparing far in advance for the auspicious occasion--houses are rebuilt, restored, purged, and cleansed with a fresh coat of cow dung and mud. The bazaars are choked with people shopping for gifts, buying offerings for the numerous pujas. Goats, chickens, ducks and water buffalos are herded and trucked into Kathmandu, as well as the outer-lying localities. Moreover, people are on the move, swamping the transportation networks from the large, twin-engine Avro airplanes to the narrowest foot paths, all moving toward home and loved ones to participate in this, the largest festival. Schools, government offices, and many businesses close for 10 to 15 days. This is the time of the year when if you're in the midst of a training program, about all you can do is stress the cross-cultural aspect, because your language staff and HMG officials will likely be far from the training site.

The first nine days of the festival are referred to as Navaatri, or nine nights, and the first day known as Ghatasthapan, or when the sacred water-holding vessel baked of red clay, Kalash, is set up in the home. This vessel is supposed to represent Durga and is the usual form depicted in most houses; other households may choose to display the 18-armed figurine of Durgaa, with weapons in each hand, a garland of severed heads, and displaying outstretched tongue. Outside the home, barley seeds are sown in little mounds of sandy soil from the banks of a holy river, and, of course, cow dung. After 10 days, when the seeds have become 5-6 inch seedlings, they are then used to bless one's children in the name of Durgaa, by placing them on top of their heads.

The seventh day of Dasain, Phulpaati, is when the public activities actually begin in Kathmandu. On this day, a cluster

of royal astrologers and priests lead a procession from Hanuman Dhoka to Rani Pokhari, where the Phulpaati, or flowers and Kalash are received that have come from the sanctuary at Gorkha, the birth place of Prithvi Narayan Shah, about 40 miles northwest of the city. At Rani Pokhari, a religious ceremony takes place followed by a military gun salute from Tundikhel where the King and Queen review the troops, award medals, and give Dasain greetings to all. The procession returns to Hanuman Dhoka with the Phulpaati of flowers, banana tree leaves, and sugar cane where they are met by their majesties, who, in turn, worship the flower idol.

The eighth day, or Maha-astami, is the day when the sacrifices begin in massive numbers. In the homes, people fast in preparation for the "Black Night," when they will sacrifice goats and chickens for a huge meat feast. At midnight, "Black Night" commences and inside the courtyards of Hanuman Dhoka, shielded from the view of foreigners, 108 buffalos, and various other animals, are slain in sacrifice to Durgaa. In accordance with special Tantric rites, each animal is sacrificed in a particular manner. They can be sacrificed by hacking through the neck or throat, slashing the head, or even piercing through the heart. However, no matter how each animal is slaughtered, each beast is supposed to personify evil in the form of the demon, Mahisasura; while the slayer depicts Durgaa.

Most animals are slain by slitting the throat, after holding the neck and tail outstretched with lengths of rope in attempt to bathe the nearby idol in blood. At the Taleju temple, the higher the blood spurts, the better the omen, as they try to splatter the highest tier in the temple. It is also believed that if the head is severed in one hack that this is also a good omen. Thus, the Kukhri knife blade is wielded down on the animal's neck with as much brawn as possible.

After the head is cut off, the head is set on the ground with a piece of the tail in its mouth, facing the image inside the temple. The head is later disposed of by the temple-keeper, while the body is returned to the donor, which is now considered a gift from the gods. Animals that are sacrificed are believed to be helped on their upward path with the possibility of being reincarnated as a human in their next existence.

For vegetarians and Buddhist Newars, the animal sacrifice is now replaced by hacking demon-faced painted pumpkins to pieces, or by breaking duck eggs over the idols.

In the past, human sacrifices are rumored to have occurred. People say that even today, children occasionally disappear, which some claim as the work of Tantric Yogis who hypnotize the child and lead him to the thickest forests where the child is forced to

undergo year-long initiations in preparation for its eventual sacrifice. It is still whispered that a village off the road to Godavari has those Tantric practitioners who still perform this ancient ritual.

On the ninth day of Dasain, more animal sacrifices occur both in the home and in the temple. Newars call this day "Syako Tyako," or "the more you kill, the more you gain" day. On this day, the goat's head is cut into eight parts--two eyes, two ears, two jaws, one nose, and one tongue. The head is then reassembled, tied together by reeds, and cooked. It is then taken to the home of the oldest male relative, usually the father, and eight males seated in a row, according to seniority each eat the one portion awarded to them according to the age ranking.

The tenth day is known as "Vijaya Dashami," which marks the day when Ram was victorious over the ten-headed demon, Ravana, after being invested by the shakti, or supreme female energy, of Durgaa. This is the day when people dressed in their new clothes go to visit and pay respect to their elders so that they may receive the tika of vermillion, sandal paste, rice, and curd, which is also mixed with the sproutings from the barley seeds. After the king himself has received the tika from a Brahmin priest, government officials, likewise, go to visit the King who blesses them with this victorious tika.

This tenth day of Dasain culminates with the sword processions of dancers disguised as Bhairab, Kali, Ganesh, Kumari, etc. These dancers carry ancient swords in their hands that tremble due to their being "possessed" by the deities. Spectators amidst the noisy crowd who are wearing leather and/or carrying an umbrella are forewarned to stay clear of the sword-holders, as sight of these things can provoke an attack.

With the full moon past, the country resumes its normal pace, sojourners return to their homes, workers return to their jobs, and the language staff for the numerous training programs, make a hasty departure from their homes back to the various training sites.

#### Tihaar/Diwaali

##### The Festival of Lights

Kartik (October-November)

This five-day festival begins on the thirteenth day of the waning moon of Kartik and is regarded as the second major festival for all Nepalese. It is celebrated to honor Vishnu's wife, Laksmi, the Goddess of Wealth and Fortune. Laksmi is often

depicted enthroned upon a lotus with a stream of gold coins coming from one of her four hands. During Tihaar, she is said to fly around, upon the back of an owl on her yearly inspection of the people's houses to see if they are clean and well-lit. If she is pleased, it is said that the family's treasures and savings will be well-protected, as will the grain stores from the recently-harvested fields.

Tihaar, which is also known as Yama Panchak, or the Five Days of Yama, the God of Death, begins with the Day of the Crow, when the god's black messenger is reverenced. This is done by setting out in the open offerings of food, coins, oil-wick lamps, and incense in small dishes of sewn-together leaves. The second day is the Day of the Dogs, or the day of the guardians of Yama's gates. On this day, unlike the rest of the days of the year, dogs are not beaten or harmed in any way, but instead given a tika, adorned with garlands and fed well, whether they are stray or pets. Dogs are generally considered lowly, disgusting beasts since they consume human excrement off the streets, despite the fact that this habit actually performs a service for the people.

The third day is the most important one in Tihaar. In the morning, cows are given tikas and garlands, and doused with yellow and red powder. This is also the day that people remove their yellow raksha thread from their wrist that they have worn for three months since Janai Purnima and tie it to the tail of a sacred cow. People touch the cow's body with their heads, bow down to its feet, and even crawl between its legs on all fours, all for the purpose of humbly asking for assistance and guidance for their souls when they leave this world.

On the evening of this day, after the homes have been well-scrubbed and cleansed with red mud and cow dung, each one is embellished with tiny oil lamps, candles, and more recently electric lights. These are supposed to attract Laksmi's attention as she makes her night-time ride. Also inside the houses, pathways are marked by more lamps and little white footprints made from rice flour paste to show Laksmi the way to the family's treasured possessions. This particular aspect of the festival is especially beautiful in the villages, as opposed to the city where, though it is spectacular, the clash of electric decorations obscures the delicate effect of the flickering candles and mustard oil-wick lamps. I have a pleasant, vivid memory of riding my bicycle down a dusty road on the virtually moonless night towards my village with tiny, shimmering flames leading me all along the way.

The fourth day of Tihaar is worshipped in various ways. Some people worship their oxen in hope that they will remain healthy and disease-free, while others bless their vocational

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implements and tools, including their tractors, if there is one. Cow dung is also worshipped, after forming it into a mound or making an effigy of a man and sticking it to a wall.

Newars perform "Mha Puja," "Body Puka," on this day which is the worship of the body as a temple. For this, mandalas are drawn on the floor, and after each family member has sat in front of his respective geometric design, offerings are made including flowers, seeds, incense, red powder, strings of beans for wearing around the neck, and a long wick. The ritual is one to purify and protect the body in the upcoming year.

The fifth and final day is Bhai Tika, when sisters worship their brothers by making holy circles of water and oil around them and by feeding them specially prepared foods and sweets. The brothers in return give their sisters presents. If a boy has no sister, then a close-to-kin female relative may perform the ceremony. The King also receives a tika on this day from his sisters which is accompanied by a thirty-one gun salute.

Gambling is also characteristic of this festival and is believed to please Laksmi. Winning is considered a good omen.

#### Haribodhini Ekadasi

The Awakening of Lord Vishnu

Kartik (October-November)

This ekadasi, occurring four days before the full moon in Kartik, is the most auspicious of the eleventh-day lunar phases, and marks the end of a four month period of uneasiness when Vishnu, or Naravan, remains inactive. For Hindus in Kathmandu, they have the option of making a pilgrimage to Narayanthan to pay their respects, or they can perform the pujas in their own homes. In any case, fasting for 24 hours without even water is recommended for, according to some, he who fails to do worship on this ekadasi may be reincarnated as a rooster.

If the puja is performed in the privacy of one's home, the devotee, after taking a bath to consecrate his body, sits on a special prayer rug before the idol of Vishnu and performs a series of rituals, sings hymns, and chants Vishnu's name while concentrating on his image. The devotee then prostrates himself before the Vishnu image, and then pours a mixture of ghee, dahi, or curd, milk, and honey over the idol.

For people going to Narayanthan to visit the Sleeping Vishnu, the usual offerings of flowers, coins, oil-wick lamps,

powders, and rice are donated amidst the masses' chanting, singing, and circumambulation. One peculiar offering given to Vishnu during this puja is a special kind of green pumpkin stuffed with coins and valuables.

### Bibaaha Panchami

#### The Wedding of Sita and Ram

Maarga (November-December)

This celebration that occurs on the fifth day of the light half of Maarga, or Mansir, though a minor festival in most parts of Nepal, is one of the biggest, gala festivals in the city of Janakpurdham. The reason for this being a large festival locally is because it commemorates the wedding of the beloved avatar of Vishnu, Ram, with Sita. This is reputed to have occurred in Janakpur itself, the ancient Mithila kingdom of Janak, Sita's father.

In this festival, the wedding and sacred bow-breaking ceremonies are re-enacted, not to mention the numerous readings pundits read of the Ramayana. This festival attracts tens of thousands of pilgrims--not just from Nepal but from all over India,

The wedding ceremony takes place in the Rama Mandir, across from the holy pond Dhanush Sagar, where Sita's hand for marriage was won by Ram. At this reknowned spot, Ram not only strung the bow, but broke it, one piece ascending to heaven, another piece remaining on earth. The actual wedding ceremony, which is largely financed by the Guti Sansthan, is conducted in a manner typical of a rich, Hindu matrimonial rite with luxurious decorations, gifts, dowries, and colossal processions. The mock performances, which are preceeded by pundits reading the Ramayana, and by the Swayambar (bow-breaking rite), are performed with both mannikin-like images and children, the latter regarded during this time as living embodiments of Ram and Sita. The couples are then taken in procession on elephants to the Janaki Mandir and other sacred places in the vicinity.

This festival attracts many colorful characters. Sadhus are noteworthy for the various penances and vows they are undertaking. There are also numerous magicians, snake charmers, musicians, medicine men, and hundreds of salesmen who set up temporary booths along the roadside selling their wares and handicrafts. Though the throngs of people are often oppressive, it can at the same time be a very interesting sight for the person who just comes to observe.

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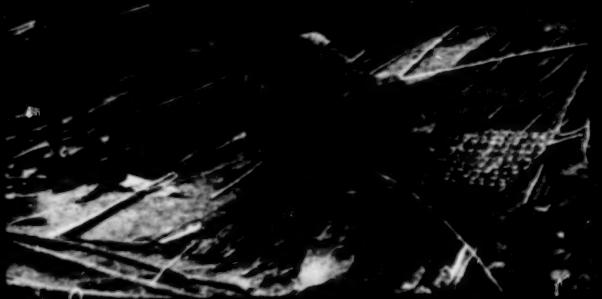
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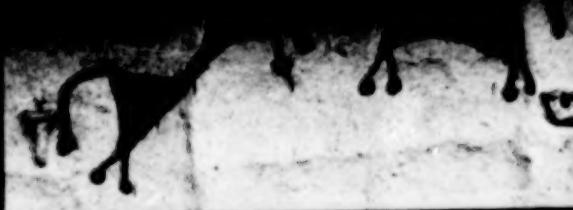
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### Yomari Poohni/Dhaanya Purnimaa

Celebration of the Harvest Moon

Maarga (November-December)

This small, homey festival that falls on the full moon day of Maarga is celebrated in gratitude to Laksmi after the reaping of the fields. Newars make a special sweetbread that is not only eaten by the family, but offered to the goddess, as well as the numerous beggars appearing at their doors for alms. On this day the grain coffers are kept locked and never sold as it is believed that the seeds and kernals in store may be multiplied by Laksmi. Brahmins, on this day, offer unhusked rice, synonymous with wealth, to a sacrificial fire, while hill people clean their cowsheds, all in tribute to Laksmi on this day.

### Maagh Sankraanti

The First Day of Capricornus

Maagh (Mid-January)

Following the Nepali month of Paush, from mid-December to mid-January, which is considered an unholy month inauspicious for weddings by some people, comes the month of Maagh, when the sun enters Capricornus, and thus changes from its winter course. Though this day signals the coming of warm temperatures and warrants holy bathing, it is still a chilly day for such an activity, especially outside the Terai. For this type of purgatory gesture, the confluences of two or more rivers are considered sacred, and hence, conducive for holy bathing. The geography of Nepal has created numerous such holy localities throughout the country, where festivals, fairs and bazaars occur.

Besides bathing on this day this is also an especially auspicious day for rubbing mustard oil, either plain or after being boiled with black lentils, on one's hair, body, without forgetting a few drops in the ear. Though this is a common gesture throughout the year, it is deemed especially important to apply the oil on this day, and then bask in the sun. The belief behind this is one of maintaining health, as the oil is supposed to kill all parasites on the body.

In this same way, for health reasons (and especially to generate bodily warmth), special foods of ghee, sesame seeds, and molasses, are made into sweet balls and served to families, friends, priests and beggars. Fish, meat, and the home-brewed wines and beers are also served. Overall, it is another occasion when families get together for a festive reunion.

### Basanta Panchami

The Advent of Spring

Maagh (January-February)

On the fifth day of the waxing moon of Maagh is the day of Basanta Panchami, when the ancient palace at Hanuman Dhoka was inaugurated in Basantapur, the Place of Spring. This day, which marks the first day of spring, is a government holiday when high government officers, along with the King and the Royal family, assemble for music and ceremonies attuned with the time of the year, as well as to worship Saraswati, the Goddess of Learning. Thus, due to this latter aspect of the day, students, scholars, authors, writers, poets, artists, and musicians may also hold this day in high esteem.

Saraswati is the beautiful goddess encircled by the petals of a red lotus, atop her majestic white swan, and holding a lyre, a book, and a rosary--in totality symbolizing knowledge in all fields of learning, both the objective and subjective. She is the daughter of Shiva and Parvati, the brother of Ganesh, and the wife of Brahma.

On this day her idols are worshipped in the temples, homes, and schools. In the latter especially, idols are erected and consecrated with garlands, incense, and sweets. Schools have open house which may include pageantries and competitive sport activities. Young children are taught their first letters on this day.

Buddhists choose to worship the Bodhisattva of Wisdom, Manjusri on this day.

### Festival of a Thousand and One Lights

Maagh (January-February)

This popular festival of Tibetan Buddhists occurring on the full moon of Maagh is an anniversary celebration for the erection of the enormous Buddhist Stupa at Bouddha Nath. Also during this month is the Tibetan New Year, and subsequently, the two auspicious occasions bring many Tibetan pilgrims into the valley from the surrounding hills and mountains in their thick, wooly robes and boots, adorned with coral, turquoise, and gold.

The legend behind the construction of this giant temple goes back to the days of yore when a King of Nepal, who apparently was a high Lama of Tibet in a previous incarnation, built a

palace with an ornate, three-headed dragon fountain that was to supply the royal domain with water. However, after the construction of the palace no water could be drawn from the fountain. Distraught, the King was informed in a dream that if a person of high esteem was sacrificed, water would flow eternally from the fountain. He then sent for his son and told him that the next morning there would be a man wrapped in white cloth next to the fountain, and that he was to behead him.

The next morning, the son in obeisance went to the fountain and, finding a person wrapped in white cloth, severed his head, and water gushed immediately from the dragon heads. The son, after looking at the head, recognizing it as his father's, was stricken with grief and in repentance went into seclusion to meditate. The goddess on whom he was focusing his attention appeared and told him that he would be purged of his grief if he erected a glorious temple on a spot of land where a great white crane would alight the next morning. The prince, who had been practicing his austerities on a hilltop above the present site of Bouddha Nath, saw a giant white crane emerge from the sun and land just below him, and it was there where he was determined to build the greatest Buddhist temple of the land to expiate himself of the great crime of patricide.

Today, pilgrims and monks come to the Bouddha Nath to circumambulate the stupa, designed in the shape of a mandala, and spin the multitude of prayer wheels, a gesture that is equivalent to reciting the prayers inscribed on paper inside them. The Chini Lama, in representation of His Holiness the Dalai Lama, dons golden robes and leads chants interspersed with ringing bells, clamoring cymbals, and bellows from hollowed, human femur bones. Red strips of cloth are then handed out to the throngs to bind around their necks and the festival is enchantingly culminated at midnight with the candle procession around the stupa by thousands of Buddhists.

### Shiva Raatri

The Night of Lord Shiva

Phaalgan (February-March)

On the fourteenth night of the dark fortnight of Phaalgan, pilgrims and devotees from all over Nepal and India flock to Pashupati Nath. Here they bathe, fast, and worship the highest revered Shiva lingum of Nepal. On the temple grounds, where it is considered fortuitous to die with your feet in the holy water of the Bagmati and be cremated on the banks, pilgrims come to camp on the grassy hills, amidst the monkey-filled trees, next to thousands of tiny campfires scattered like jewels upon

the earth on the moonless night. People chant and sing in praise of Shiva, oblivious to the lack of physical comfort due to the crowded conditions and chill of the night.

### Holi

#### The Festival of Colors

Chaitra (February-March)

This raucous festival, spurred by the consumption of spirits and bhong (a derivative of cannabis, made into a sweet), is a very significant social festival. During this time, the girl-boy social structure, i.e., social contact with girls or women other than those of sibling or marital relation, is partially dissipated, though in a bizarre way. Girls and boys, if in the festive spirit, douse each other with brightly colored powders and dyes, while boys may sing out short songs of romance to smiling girls hanging off balconies and peering down from windows above the bazaar streets. However, in attempt not to distort the picture of what actually occurs, many times unsuspecting, well-dressed girls in their fine sarees and/or slacks of Kathmandu, as well as the Indian women with face and body well-hidden from the public, are tantalizing targets for boys to direct their water and dye-filled balloons.

There are a few versions as to the origin of this gay festival. Most of them deal with Krishna, the playful, amorous deity who would drive the young women into rapture with sweet melodies played on his mystical flute. One story has it, that Krishna came upon a group of maidens bathing naked in the holy river of the Jamuna, which was considered sacrilegious. Consequently, after secretly gathering their clothes and towels, he hung them amongst the branches of a tree in which he sat. When he revealed his presence by playing on his magic flute, the maidens, in shame, submerged themselves and begged Krishna to return their clothes. Krishna then expounded on the sinful nature of their activities, and said that they would receive their clothing only after they stood before the sun and paid tribulations by letting water flow through their cupped hands which were to each symbolize conch shells. However, Krishna's stipulation was that they had to perform this rite in knee-deep water, and when they arose to do this, their faces were said to flush bright red with embarrassment. It is from this last effect, according to some, that red powders are smeared on the faces of men and women today.

Other versions tell of the demoness, Holika, who was the sister of an impious, evil king, who, paradoxically, had an ardent worshipping son devoted to Krishna. After all attempts failed at punishing his son for behavior and beliefs contrary to

his own, the King ordered that his son be trampled to death by an elephant. But when this was attempted, the prince uttered Krishna's name, and the beast humbly knelt beside him. The King then tried to have him thrown off a cliff into a rocky river but this also failed, as well as every other attempt to kill him. Finally, Holika, believing she was immune to fire, grabbed the son and jumped into a roaring fire, but when the flames died down the prince was the only one remaining, again due to Krishna's intervention. And today, it is believed that Holi is celebrated because of Holida's demise.

Whatever the origin, Holi is a festival playfully participated in by the people. Indians also observe this festival in much the same manner though their celebration usually occurs the day after the Nepali one, which is often also when the Terai people do their rejoicing.

#### Chaitra Dasain

Rama Navami

Chaitra (March-April)

This festival, which falls on the ninth bright half of Chaitra, lasts until the full moon. At this time a half a million people gather in Janakpurdham to have nothing but fun and music for seven days, in celebration of the famous, revered avatar of Vishnu, Ram, on occasion of his birthday. Hermits, sadhus, ascetics, pilgrims from all over India and Nepal flock to this holy celebration.

To help feed the throngs of pilgrims the Ram Mandir sets up their own communal kitchen. It's not unusual for them to hand out eight tons of rice, four tons of chura, or flattened rice, and 800 pounds of wheat flour to the pilgrims. As with most of these festivals, it's a time for fasting, a time for penance, a time for gaining religious merit, a time for an ultimate test of brotherly love in the overcrowded condition, a time of enjoying the peace and contentment as they help their Karma along the way.

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## THE ARTS AND YOU

When we think of Nepali art we are more often than not referring to Newari art, the art of the ethnic group which dominated Kathmandu from the eighth through the mid-eighteenth centuries. Other tribal, ethnic and linguistic groups in Nepal have their own distinct and unique traditions in the arts. Everywhere people in Nepal have taken pride in their clothes, jewelry, homes, temples, tools and household implements, embellishing them with fine designs, unique shapes, startling uses of color, and distinct symbols of importance. Wherever you live and work in Nepal, take the time to note its specific artistic and cultural traditions. Where the techniques of local craftsmen, developed over centuries of generations, are threatened with extinction by the import of cheap machine-made products, help craftsmen find new markets for their work and by your own interest stimulate them to strive for excellence. Work with a local craftsman and learn how to express your own creative urges in hammered gold, cast silver, forged iron, carved wood, loomed fabrics, woven baskets, wheelthrown pots, lost-wax cast brass and bronze, block printing, flute making, wall painting--the list is endless. You may also learn folk dancing, classic drama, or how to play any of several dozen musical instruments. Don't leave Nepal without having learned the freedom and joy of having a medium by which you can express to others what you really think and feel about life.

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If on wandering through the curio shops of Kathmandu or Bodhinath you are disappointed by the quality of the paintings and other curios, or if you buy an old looking painting and discover that it is new, or try to understand its iconography and find out that it makes no sense at all, you are just another victim of the tourist trade. What you will see on the street will most likely have been mass produced by young boys in sweat shops, using cheap Indian paints, and have been rubbed with oil and smoked to make it look old. The same will be true of all of the other arts including block prints made by the thousands from zinc plates.

Attend the annual exhibition at the National Association of Fine Arts, exhibitions of individual artists, and visit the Lalit Kala Campus(the fine arts college) near to Rani Phokhari. At these exhibits and in the home of an artist or craftsman you will see works of art employing techniques and traditions perfected over the centuries and contemporary paintings and sculptures that have absorbed the latest trends in the arts and yet are distinctly Nepali.

Come to know the artists and craftsmen in the area where you are working. If you are a collector or want to have something made for your personal use then give a commission to an artist that you know. You will very likely astonish an artist or craftsman by asking to be apprenticed, but most will gladly agree once they know that you are serious and ready to put in the time required. As most artists in Nepal are at the same time farmers or hold down other full time jobs, you should likewise be able to do your job as a volunteer and in your spare time begin the lifelong process of becoming a master craftsman.

The following article on baskets of Nepal is intended to give a more indepth look at one art form that is practiced by both men and women in all parts of Nepal. Because the making of baskets requires few tools and little expenditure, baskets are generally made in the home for personal use. If you are a volunteer living with a family where baskets are made or any other craft practiced, express an interest in what is being done, and the best way to prove your sincerity is to try your hand at it and see just how much patience and skill is required to do even the most simple things.



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## BASKETS OF NEPAL

Stephen T. Eckerd

"Get out, get out," the old lady cried, throwing her arms in the air. I started to retreat to the door; everyone else in the courtyard just laughed. She had understood my question, the name of the basket was "get out, get out."

"These are arms," she said, pointing to the red spirals radiating out from the center of the basket. "This is a very jealous basket, it wants to hold only the finest sweets, the arms are throwing out all of the other baskets."

While living in Nepal, I received many baskets as gifts, including "get out, get out." Like the rest of the villagers, I used a flat bamboo tray to clean my rice, shallow trays of Siki grass to serve sweets and breads, baskets with tightly-fitting tops to store valuables, and a three-feet-in-diameter, covered wedding basket to hold my clothes. Without realizing it, I had made quite a collection of baskets. Having a collection, I decided to make a study of the baskets of Nepal. Uma Sunkar Dwibedi, a young Brahmin from the Bhojpuri-speaking central Nepali Terai, worked with me to collect baskets, identify designs, and record the function of each basket.

Nepal is a small country of great physical and cultural diversity. The Himalayas, forming a five-hundred-mile northern border with Tibet, contain six of the world's ten highest peaks. One hundred miles south of Everest, the world's highest mountain, Nepal and India meet along the northern edge of the Gagnetic Plain, known as the Terai, and only four to six hundred feet above sea level. Between these extremes, the Mahabharat mountains and seven major rivers flowing north to south divide the country into isolated valleys in which over twenty major ethnic, tribal, and linguistic groups have maintained their individual cultural identities. Travel and trade in Nepal is, with few exceptions, on foot. Tibetan porters in the north and elephants in the jungles to the south are the prerogative of

\*Reprinted, with permission, from Pacific Discovery, vol. XXXIII, no. 1 (January-February 1980).

rich merchants and landlords. Trucks and buses ply the five hundred miles of motorable roads leading from India to Pokhara, Kathmandu, and the length of the eastern Terai. For the vast majority of Nepal's fourteen million inhabitants travel means walking, and trade the carrying of goods in baskets.

Available materials, multiple functions, and tribal identity have resulted in a great diversity of basket designs and basket-making techniques in different geographic and tribal areas of Nepal. Though primarily for the carrying and storage of goods, baskets in Nepal are a major form for creative expression. Not only may baskets be identified according to geographic region and tribal group, but a particular village, family, or individual basket maker may be famous for baskets of high craftsmanship and unique design. While many baskets are produced only for personal use, baskets are also made for trade with other villages and may form a major source of income for a good basket maker. Among the Hindus, certain caste groups make baskets for the entire community, trading them in the bazaar for rice and other staples. Baskets by the Tharu women of the Terai are traded for the amount of rice that they can hold and are highly prized throughout Nepal for the quality of the design and workmanship.

In the hills of Nepal, drinking water must often be carried a mile or more from a stream below the village, crops must be carried home from distant fields scattered up and down the terraced hillsides, and goods carried to market must often require a journey along mountain trails of a week or more. A basket called the "dhoka" is the backpack of Nepal. Made of bamboo in an open weave, it is lightweight and strong, with the size varying according to the individual and the function. Small "dhokas" for children to carry water containers contrast with four and five foot high baskets used to carry much lighter leaves and grass to feed the domestic animals. "Dhokas" for carrying goods over long distances are designed to carry loads of from eighty to a hundred and fifty pounds.

The "dhoka" is but one type of basket made from bamboo. Certain Hindu caste and tribal groups earn their living making and selling bamboo baskets. In one section of the weekly bazaar can be found several basket makers with stacks of bamboo trays and baskets for sale while they sit and work on unfinished baskets. Each member of the family has a part in the making of the baskets. The men collect and split the bamboo, sons and daughters weave the bottoms and insides, while the women complete the baskets, often while nursing a baby on their laps. Bamboo is used for making trays for winnowing rice, baskets with flat bottoms and high sides to hold vegetables for sale in the market, baskets with tops to store goods, fans to keep flies away from food when serving guests, and large



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openwork baskets for carrying grass to feed livestock. The latter, called "dehli," may be a foot and a half high and up to five feet in diameter.

In the southern part of Nepal, women in each household make baskets from grasses found on the edge of the forests of the Terai. Bhojpuri and Maithili speaking groups in the central and eastern Terai; Muslims the length of Nepal; and the Tharus, a tribal group living in the Terai forests, all make baskets for their own use. While sharing many designs and basket-making techniques, each group has a distinct style of basket making that is identified by the shapes, designs, colors, and weaving techniques used by members of the group.

In late summer, when Uma Sunkar went out to collect grass for the women of his household for making baskets, I went along. Two grasses are collected, "kar" and "siki." Both grow in swamps in the jungle and along the edges of irrigation canals. The "kar" grows in clumps reaching a height of twelve feet and "siki" to three or four feet. When the grass is ready to bloom, but before it has put forth a flower, the flower with its protective sheath is pulled out, with a gentle tug, and the sheath, a foot and a half long, is dried in the sun. To get a deep and permanent color, the grass is soaked in a vat of hot water and dye over a cow dung fire for twenty-four hours. While weaving, the grass is kept soaked in water to make it flexible. The baskets are woven in coil technique by weaving wefts of colored grass around a warp of grass whose thickness determines the width of each coil. The smaller the coil, the tighter the weave and the more elaborate the design.

When a woman in Nepal sits down to weave a basket, she has more in mind than just function. The basket must be beautiful. From her observation of birds and flowers, fruits and vegetables, people and animals, the basket weaver will create symbols and abstractions to decorate each basket. Each basket will reflect tribal traditions and at the same time be unique. Throughout the day, in periods of rest between cooking, cleaning, working in the fields, and looking after the children, the women sit weaving baskets. For them, basket weaving is both a source of creative expression and an act of meditation.

The Maithili basket makers are best known for the brilliant colors and unique shapes of their baskets. Red, the color of happiness, predominates, with yellow, blue, and green being used for contrast. "Siki" is preferred for its high sheen and deep saturation of color. The basket is first loosely woven with natural grass in coil technique. Colored grass is then embroidered over the coils with a needle. A young girl first learns to weave a grass tray for carrying flowers, incense, fruit, and sweets to the temple for worshipping the

village gods. The design is usually of a flower of multi-colored radiating petals. With experience, she will learn to make baskets of increasingly complex shapes and designs including baskets for trinkets, in the shapes of birds, fishes, and turtles. Girls marry at an age where in the west they would still be playing with dolls. So they will not miss their family when moving to their husband's house, the older women weave a set of doll caricatures of each member of the family.

The Bhojpuri-speaking people of the central and western Terai are best known for their large baskets with tops used to store sewing materials, and in very large sizes for carrying and storing the gift of saris and cloth sent with the bride to her new home. While red predominates, the baskets are of deeper, more somber shades of red and green with a very limited use of other colors. "Kar" is preferred for making the baskets for its strength and durability. Colored grass is used in weaving the baskets in coil technique with additional overlay embroidery work being added to the finished basket. Tall baskets of many sections used as tiffin carriers are further strengthened with the addition of bamboo struts on the outside which are wrapped with colored grass and attached to the outside as columns, for the baskets are called "mandir," meaning temple. Small conical baskets are made according to the size of the child for eating puffed rice. Baskets with pierced tin bottoms are used for sifting flour. For every household function there is a basket of a distinct size and shape. For more common baskets, used every day, the designs may be quite simple: spirals, diamond patterns, checks, and alternate bands of color and natural grass. Each has a name: birds and ponds, fish, comb, swords and saris, and the names of flowers, fruits, and vegetables. The designs used in basket weaving combine a keen observation of nature and an ability to abstract the essence of an object into a motif or symbol which captures the significance of beauty in simple objects and life forms as they exist in village life.

True to Islamic tradition, the Muslims of Nepal restrict their designs to abstract and floral motifs. The shapes are simple and the designs very complex. In contrast to the other basket traditions in Nepal, the Muslims prefer soft colors with a predominance of yellows, pinks, and soft blues and greens. Aside from the use of "siki" and "kar" grasses, the Muslims make baskets and toys from the leaf of the Thadi palm. Toys include whistles, rattles for babies, and small baskets. These are taken to the fairs and sold to Hindus and Muslims.

The most highly developed basketmaking tradition in Nepal is practiced by the Tharus, the oldest tribe in the Nepali Terai. Living deep in the jungle apart from their Hindu neighbors to the south and tribal groups in the hills, they have an

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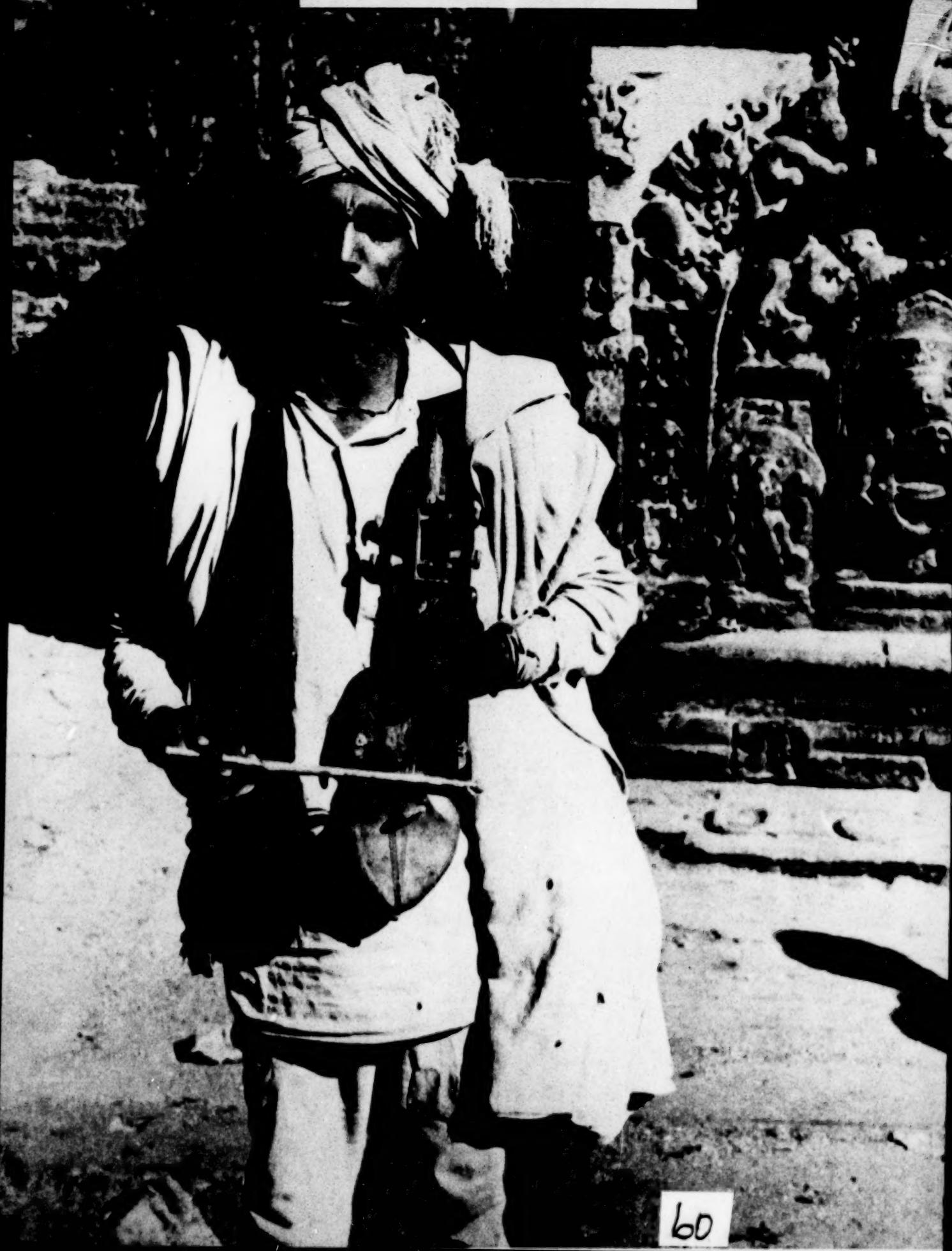


endless supply not only of grasses for weaving but also peacock feathers, polished seeds, and small freshwater mollusk shells for decorating the fringes of the finished baskets. Intricate designs in deep purple, green red, and blue-black are woven in coil technique against a background of natural golden yellow. Bridegrooms holding pennants and riding on elephants, people holding hands in a circle, and intricate flower designs decorate even the most utilitarian baskets for daily use. Baskets to be carried on the head in wedding processions are given a lace-like fringe of seeds and shells that jingle when carried. Baskets are woven so tightly that they can hold water. Baskets with tight-fitting tops for holding valuables have overlay designs woven into the edges representing flies and rat's teeth to ward off these common village foes. Several years of labor may be required to prepare the set of baskets to accompany the bride to her new house.

Modernization has come slowly to Nepal. Village life is little changed from what it was like 500 or 1000 years ago. Utilizing local, renewable resources, taught by mother to daughter, fulfilling basic needs, the basket-making tradition in Nepal continues to thrive. Made by each family for their personal use, baskets are highly prized in Nepal and by anyone lucky enough to receive one as a gift.

As I left the village on my return from Nepal, I was stopped again and again. "Please come in but for a moment," a friend would say, "you must have something very small to eat before so great a journey." I would be served tea and sweets. Each time, while I was eating, I would hear women whispering in the next room. Sometimes the women would come to the door, more often a man would be called to the door, and in front of me would be placed an incredibly beautiful basket. "I know that it is nothing," he would say, "but my mother has made this one for you." Inside might be smaller baskets by a wife, a sister, a grandmother, and an aunt. In many cases, because of Hindu caste restrictions, I never met the women who made the baskets; in other cases, they were as members of my own family, and I saw how the uniqueness, creativity, and generosity of the people of Nepal are made known through their baskets.

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### SONGS AND POETRY

For Hindus and Buddhists alike, all manifold existence emanated out of the sound Ohm ( ). Before the written word, the knowledge of the human race was that which one man could learn in a lifetime, what one woman could learn in a lifetime, and transmit to another person in an unbroken line across the millenniums, and that knowledge was vast. Only a fraction of that which was and is still known, has been written down. Nepal remains to the present day a great repository of oral traditions. Not only are the great Hindu epics, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata known throughout Nepal, local traditions preserve both earlier and more recent epics, dramas, songs, stories, and poetry. Oral traditions are given expression in songs, dances, and dramas during the yearly cycles of work and worship. Gaines and Damais, traveling singers and musicians, like the minstrels of Medieval Europe, combine both contemporary events and ancient traditions in their songs and dances. Dramas and story telling at night remain popular forms of entertainment in the villages. Programs of folk music broadcast over Radio Nepal now provide a national audience for previously localized traditions. The following selections cover a time span of over 2000 years but due to limitations of space in this book, only a fraction of the living tradition.

Thousands of years of wisdom is preserved in the collection of stories known as The Panchatantra. In these stories birds and animals converse with one another. The shrewd and clever play tricks on the stupid and the gullible. They trick one another and triumph or suffer defeat. They comment on every aspect of daily life. The stories reveal keen observations of both animal behavior and human nature. Even the funniest end with a moral lesson or epigram of sagely advice as in the example "The Crows and the Owls Converse."

The stories of great kings and mythic heroes are retold in epic verse by Gaines in the hills and certain caste groups in the Terai. Drums and the sarangi, a stringed instrument played with a bow, often accompany the recitation. The complete retelling of a story may require more than a week of evening performances. While the main characters and the basic plot may be known throughout Nepal, each story teller will have his own version of the story enriched by local tradition and his own skill as a story teller. The story of Allah Rudal, of which only a short fragment is presented here, records the heroic struggle of Hindu kings to stem the Muslim invasions and is extremely popular in the Terai.

Many indigenous folk heroes and tribal deities were gradually absorbed into Hinduism, the most popular being the story of Radha and Krishna. In the oral tradition the mischievous childhood and amorous love affairs of Krishna and the Gopis (milk maid) are often sung by the women at the time of marriages or presented in dramas for the visiting wedding party.

The Gurungs of central and western Nepal have traditionally had social clubs known as Rodi where young men and women meet and where courtship is conducted through song and dance. Though the Rodi is quickly disappearing, the songs and dances have become favorites among people of both the hills and the Terai.

Songs and music remain an integral part of Newari life. Jhapu farmers play flutes, cymbals and drums on their way to and from the fields. Songs are sung while working in the fields and on all festival occasions. The Newari songs included in this chapter may be heard at temples at night, in religious processions as when the chariot of Machindranath is pulled through Patan, and being sung by farmers at planting and harvesting time.

During the past century the collected works of Laxmi Prasad Devakota, one of Nepal's greatest and best known poets, were published under the title "Muna Madan." Setting aside classical form, he wrote in the Nepali vernacular taking his inspiration from Nepali folk songs. Though he died in poverty, he is now a national hero and a source of inspiration for contemporary poets. Abhi Subedi's "Suicide at Ranipokhari," continues the tradition of social observation and philosophic speculation in Nepali poetry that is timeless in its reflections on the universality of the human condition.

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from The Panchatantra--"The Crows and the Owls Converse"

'Joy is destroyed by disappointment, the autumn by the coming of winter, darkness by the sun, a kind deed by ingratitude, grief by a pleasant occurrence, disasters by good policy, and fortune, however magnificent it may be, by bad policy.'

'Thus a king who provides his subjects with the blessings of wise counsel through his good policy in all respects enjoys the blessings of royalty.'

ALLAH RUDAL

Bhojpuri folk hero

Bhojpuri heroic epic sung in villages around the fire on winter nights. To villagers Allah Rudal was sent by God to help them.

Singer addresses his audience:

"My duty is to sing for the glory of God  
It is my duty and I am singing the Song of God  
I am singing for my favorite God and Goddess Padma  
From her face radiant beauty rains  
From ten thousand fingers she reads the Holy books.

(from such singing such blessings come)

"Even the sufferer of leprosy is cured  
A barren woman may have children  
Even the blind regain their sight.

Pray to Bhawani, Sarada Jee-ho, and Chandrika Mai

In this audience I am made to arise and play the Dholak  
(drum)  
In this day, may my honor stand  
Should I be dishonored before morning let this drum leave  
my hands  
Never again to arise in this audience.  
By Saraswati I shall forget your name!  
Therefore keep my honor (to God).  
Everyday shall I sing your name.  
The boat sails with the river's current,  
Oh mother goddess row me to shore.  
You are the boat and the helmsman  
Saraswati, you are the rudder.

The boat is in the middle of the current.

(In Hindu mythology, life is an endless river, man a boat caught in the current. God is the boat, the current, the helmsman, all the river bank, where the current stops is salvation. The singer asks God to take him ashore as repayment for his song of love and devotion.)

(Thus begins Allah Rudal)

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His body took the form of a (dacoit) robber hero.  
His officers called for iron (weapons) crying hit the East.  
To the West he had captured the Bhim mountains.

(Bhim was a giant in the Mahabharata-thus high mountains)

On the southern line he captured beyond the sea.  
On the northern line is captured Cachin, outer China and  
even Greater China.  
The seven parts of Nepal he captured.  
Many merchants' ships he also captured.  
His ship passed even over the dry desert.  
He set fire even to the waters.  
He set his boundaries even unto Balgwal.  
The day for the brave was set.  
Not even the Nagas, bravest in the world,  
Not even the bravest warrior in the world dared to come  
forth to give his hand unto Allah's hand.  
When Allah set forth upon Bendul (his horse) the weak  
closed their gates.

His enemies shut their doors.  
Locked were the forts of Kings.

Who doesn't know the King of Kings?  
From house to house all knew.  
All, all the world knew.

As sung by Balak Ram Thakur  
Aponi, Parsa Jilla  
Translated by S. Eckerd  
and Datta Roy





### Maithili Wedding Song

Radha says to Krishna; (Time: dawn)  
"O Hari (another name of Krishna) O Hari!  
Listen with your ears open;  
This is no time for fun.  
The sky which was full of stars, has become blurred  
The family of the cuckoos have given its round of coos.  
Chakba (another tropical bird), and peacocks have become silent  
after their boisterous song.  
The sleepy moon has become pale.  
The cows of the town have begun their movement on the path.  
The dragon fly has gone back into the white lotus.  
The bright red of Pan (a green leaf chewed by men) in your mouth  
has also become faint.  
The time for THAT is not good; it is dull.  
The poet Bidyapati says it is not good (at this time)  
The Whole world will laugh at us.

Translated by Massoda Mallik

### PHARI FOLK SONG

Most popular in the Gurung community of the hills. Two youths suggest to each other to claim right over two beautiful highland Gurung girls, who are much too shy.

Hello Shainla! Yes Maila  
Our sister-in-law's sisters are beautiful.  
And they hide from us behind the walls,  
When we call them to talk.  
So, shall we lift them up and run away?  
Oh! please help us.  
In our custom, we've got rights on them.  
And moreover, we are one.  
So why ask their hands from their fathers.  
Come love! let us have fun.  
Wearing Dhaka topi and slanted tika on our foreheads  
We will come with ceremonial bands  
And we will take them home  
Come love! let us be one.

Translated by Preman Bajra



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Folk-Songs of the Newars

Contributor: Kesar Lall

1

Gaji tona gansi jula haira ji koen then  
I am lean and thin; hashish has reduced me to a bag of bones,  
Doma danchhi madayawo ji jula wen then  
I am mad, for I have no money--not even a quarter-piece;  
Perka khurka dama dasa ji chhen jula bhoya then  
If I have but a few rupees, ha! what a merry feast I'll have  
in my home.

2

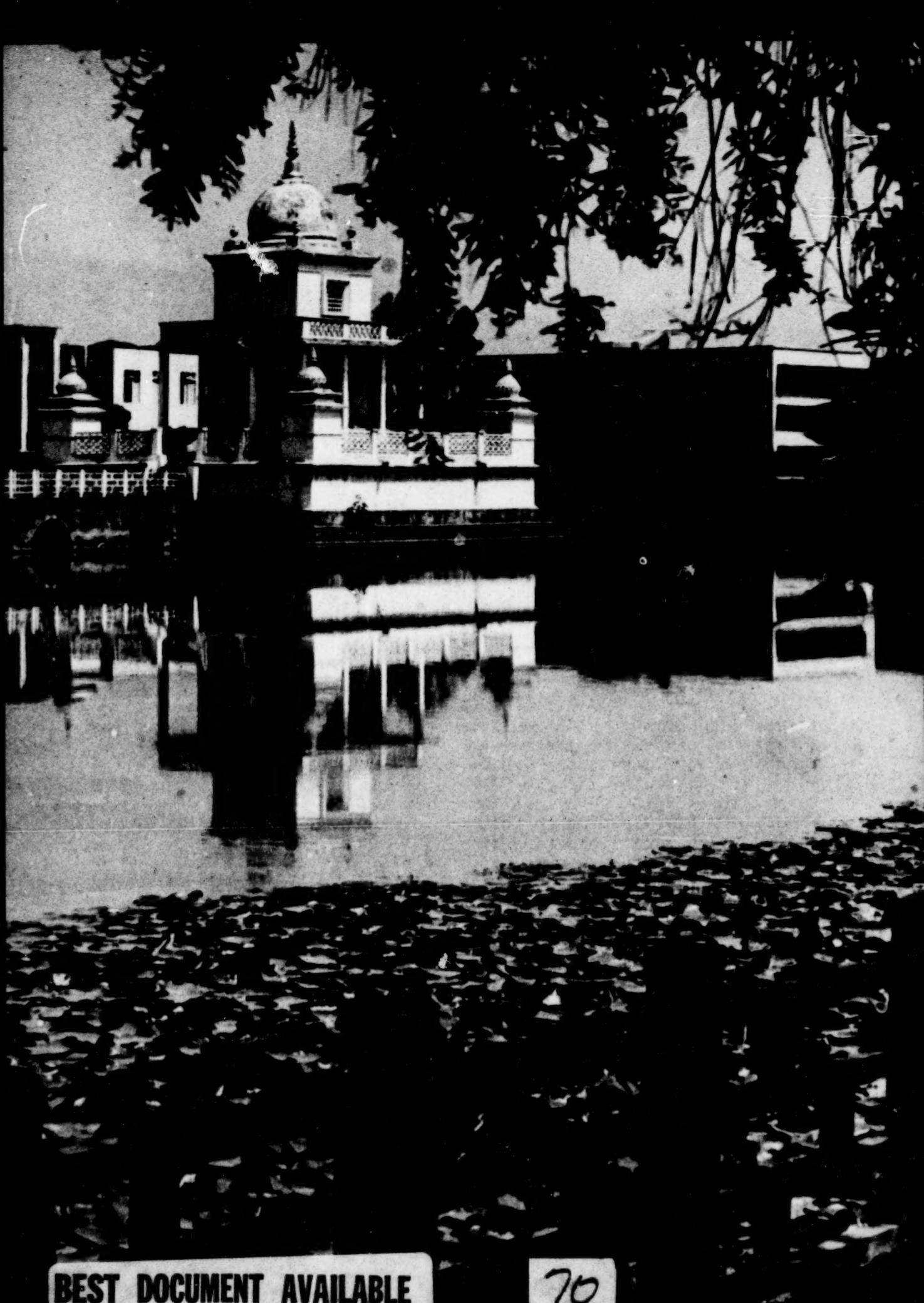
Taleju dega sike dhaka bakhun janma kaya re  
I became a pigeon, hoping to know the Taleju temple,  
Chanala hyadha qoya topan layeka syata re  
But a wicked hunter shot me dead with his gun;  
Bushnumati sike dhaka nyacha janma kaya re  
I become a fish, hoping to know the Bishnumati river,  
Madhin poden jale kenka yena re  
But a wicked fisherman carried me in his net.

3

Bhoya wolam dolan do, chona nala jholan jih  
They came in thousands to the feast, they sat row after row,  
Wulasan nisen poa syana gwara gwara  
Since then they are all upset with stomach pains.

4

Asan twale alu nyawoman sengu alu lata re  
I went to buy potatoes at Asan, But I got all rotten ones,  
Kacha kochan payena woman budhamaha bhata lata re  
I looked for a husband in a hurry and an old man I got.



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## SUICIDE AT RANIPOKHARI

Abhi Subedi

On my way to the British poets  
I found people mocking at him  
holding the mirror of death  
up to their eyes;  
He was lying by the blue water below  
where he had chosen  
to end his life the other day.  
I questioned myself,  
was it a land-locked man's  
nostalgia for the sea?

Anyway,  
I felt, he'd better not die that way,  
He made a mess of things  
by choosing it:  
He was death,  
he was distraction,  
he had raked people  
over that corner  
out of beds, colleges, Singh Durbar  
and temples.

I felt he'd better choose  
my way of walking  
between poet Bhanubhakta's statue  
and Ranipokhari  
without ever disturbing  
anybody's evenings.  
Perhaps the living has his own concerns  
of which the correction of deceased persons'  
follies is one.

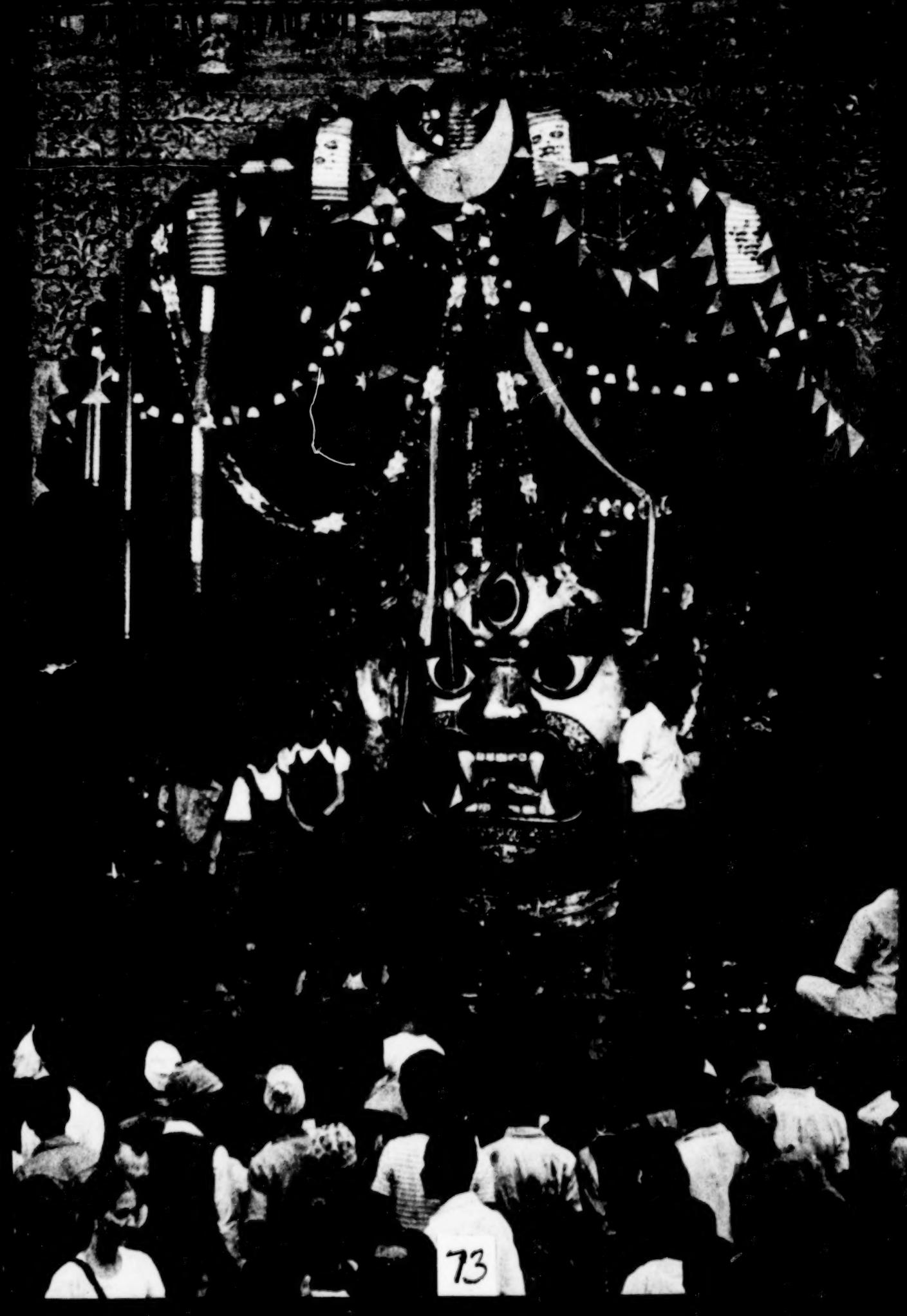
THE LUNATIC

Laxmi Prasad Devakota

Surely my friend, insane am I  
Such is my plight

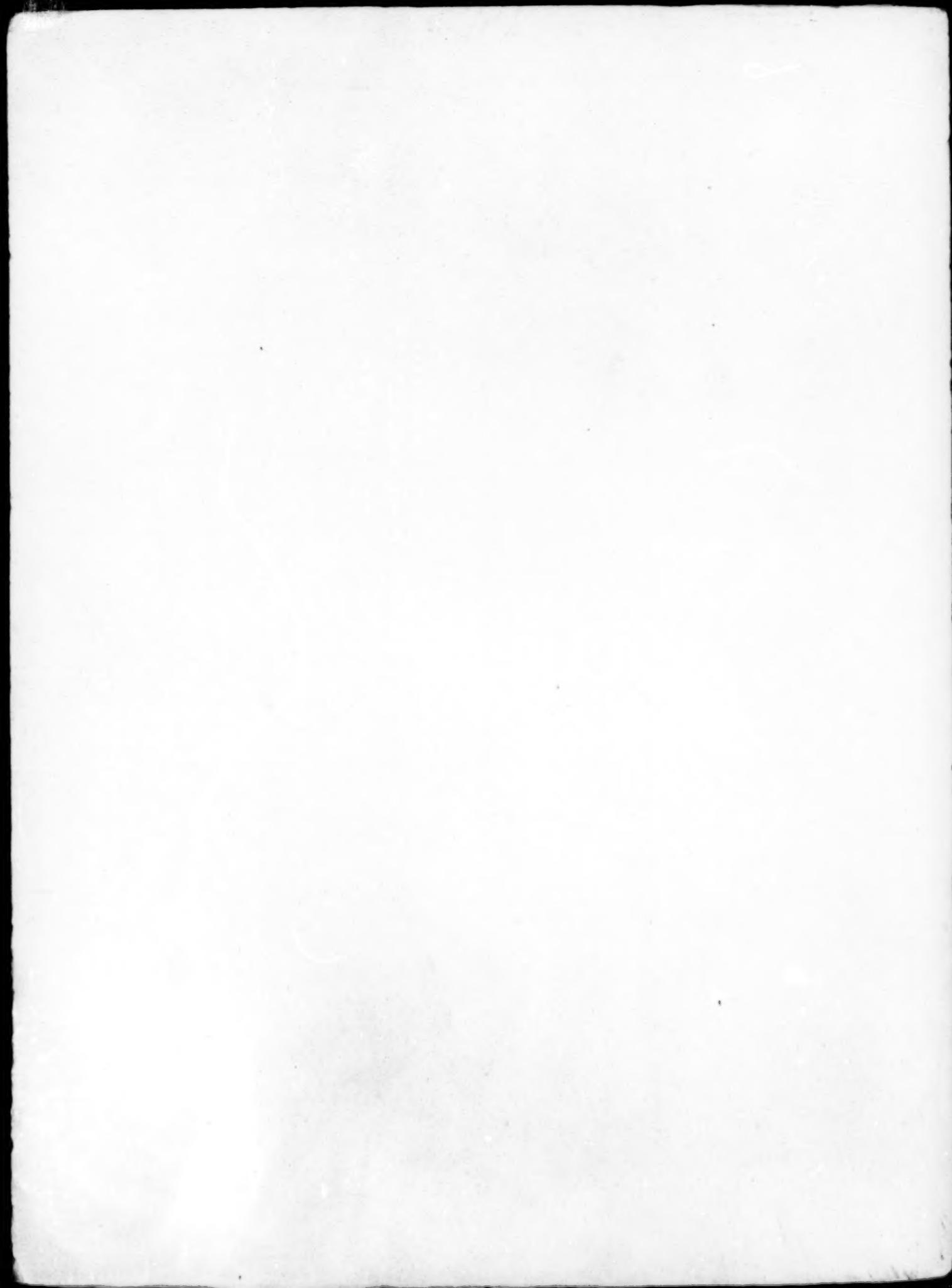
I visualize sound  
I hear the visible  
And fragile I taste  
And the ethereal is palpable to me  
Those things I touch  
Whose existence the world denies  
Of whose shape the world is unaware.  
I see a flower in the stone  
When wavelet-softened pebbles on the waters edge,  
In the moonlight,  
While the enchantress of Heaven is smiling unto me  
They exfoliating and nullifying  
Glistening and palpitating  
Rise before my eyes like tongueless things insane.  
Like flowers,  
A variety of moon binds.  
I commune with them as they do with me,  
In such a language friend  
As is never written, never even printed nor never spoken  
Unintelligible; ineffable all.  
Their language laps the moonlit Ganges shore  
Ripple by ripple,  
Surely my friends, insane am I,  
Such is my plight

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**END**

**11-2-83**